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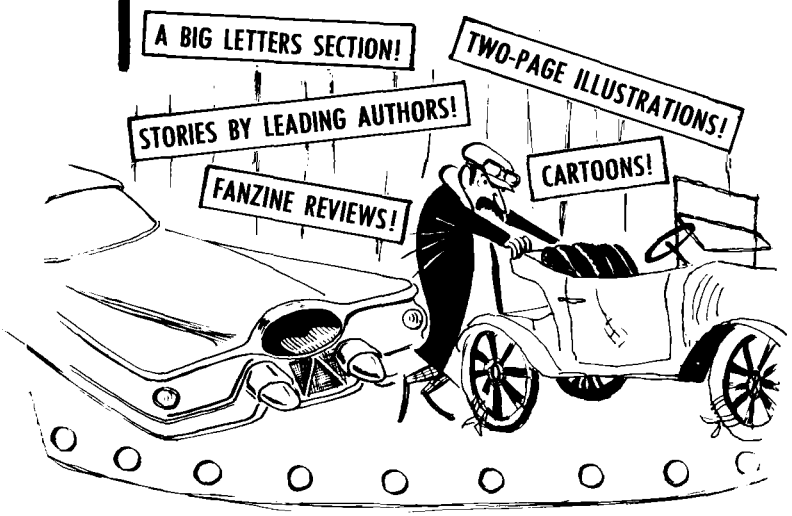

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fantastic

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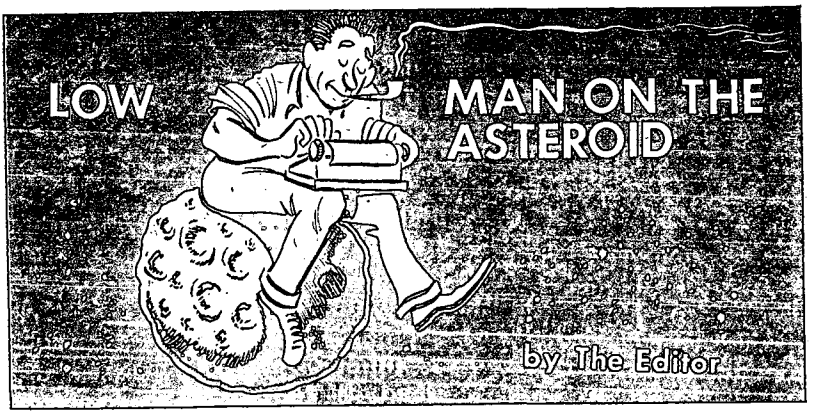

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT:

Hardly anybody actually believes space travel is more than a science-fiction gimmick.

Lincoln Barnett's article "The Starry Universe" in the December 20, 1954, issue of *Life* should be marked as the definitive work on the subject.

Nothing is forgotten quite as quickly as a science-fiction movie.

The day is not far distant when commercial travel from New York to Los Angeles will be a matter of less than two hours.

Of all pseudo-scientific theories, the "multiple-worlds" bit makes the least sense—and results in some of the most readable yarns.

Paul W. Fairman's short story in the January 4th *Saturday Evening Post* belongs in an anthology of the year's best.

The motion pictures of an atomic explosion never lose their soul-searing horror, no matter how many times you see them.

Most of the "sex-and-horror" comics on the stands should be barred for being utterly dull.

Ray Bradbury is the only truly gifted author to come out of science-fiction.

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Nobody has ever been able to make adventure on other worlds as exciting as the late Edgar Rice Burroughs.

You're getting strictly nowhere when your true love looks up at the star-studded sky and says, "I wonder how far it is to Arcturus."

A thousand years from now, money will still be called money—and not "credits."

Few men in this business write a better novel than Isaac Asimov.

Too few readers know that B. Traven's novelette, "The Third Guest," which first appeared in the March-April, 1953, issue of *Fantastic,* was selected as the best short story published that year in this country.

Writers who submit manuscripts without enclosing return postage can't think much of their work.

The imitators of Chesley Bonestell come as close to hitting the mark as the distance to Andromeda.

Kris Neville and Walter M. Miller had better get back to their typewriters.

Five will get you ten that the next science-fiction movie you see will show the heroine in an abbreviated costume.

The kinescopes of "Tales of Tomorrow" should not be allowed on the airlanes.

Most stories written about flying saucers come from California.

Dick Matheson is the most under-rated writer in the field.

The only film director who should be allowed to do George Orwell's "1984" is John Huston.

The surest way to draw a rejection slip is to tell the editor that "this story isn't very good but the next one will be better."

In every batch of submitted cartoons, the odds are that at least one will have to do with a used-spaceship salesman telling a prospective customer "Here's one with only 200,000,000 miles on the speedometer."

Stories based on dreams stamp the writer as the rankest kind of amateur.

The annual World's Science Fiction Convention should make an award of some kind—perhaps a suitably inscribed plaque—for the best short story or novelette of the year, selected by the fans themselves. A practical means of determining the winner would not be at all difficult.—HB

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Beyond the BLACK HORIZON

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

When Lorelie, out for a late swim, dived beneath the surface of that lonely lake, it meant that Earth might be doomed if she failed to come up for air!

LORELIE GAINER stood on the front porch of the lodge and took a deep breath. It was a night for poets. Spring had whispered down over the land, greening the hills and filling the air with languorous warmth and a promise of rich days to come.

Suddenly, she smiled and raised her arms to the full moon riding the tree tops. Spring, it seemed, had not only set the land astir; it had called also to her blood and she was filled with an inarticulate urge that was like new wine.

"If I were a she-wolf, I'd bay at the moon," Lorelie

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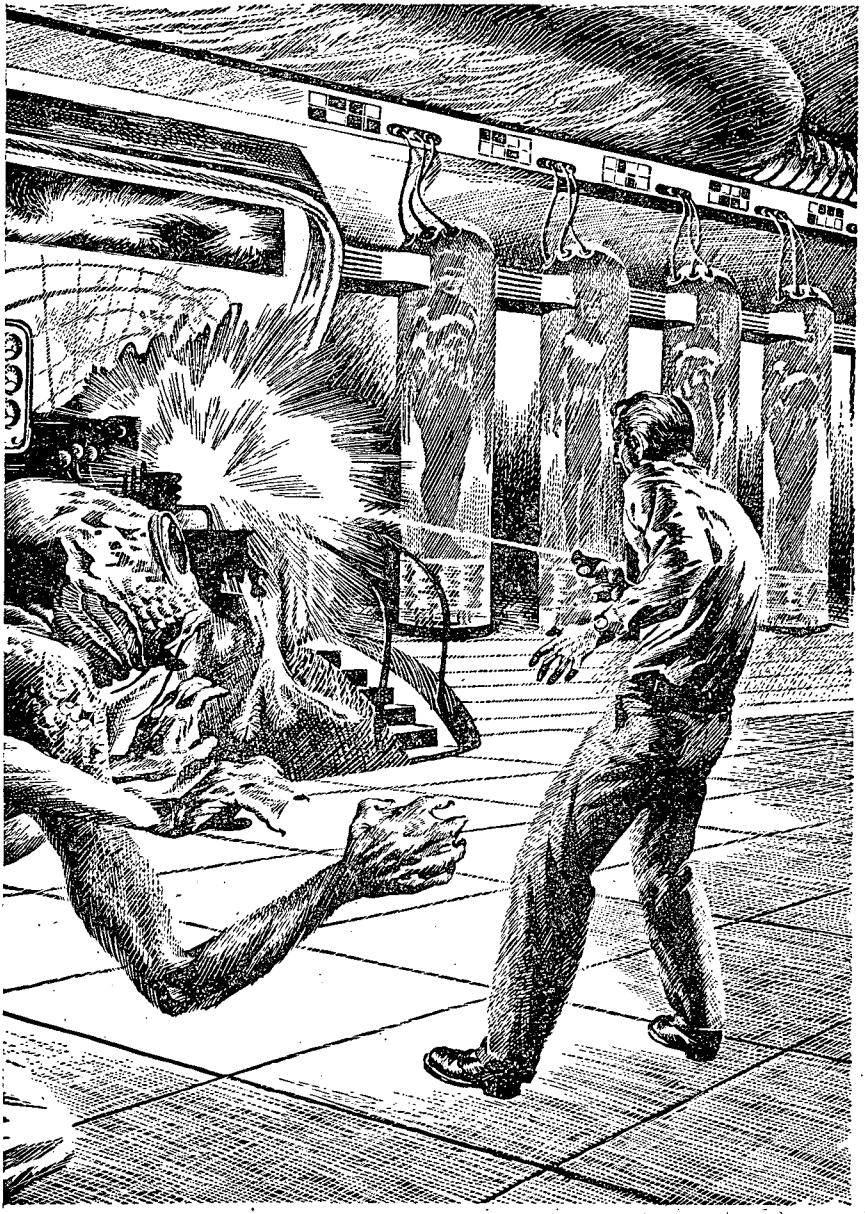

Only time for one blast; it *had* to count!

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said. She spoke aloud because there was no one to hear. She had left the Manhattan apartment on the spur of the moment—halfway through a Martini. She had looked out over the lights of the town and thought: *There's a moon up at the lodge. It's scattering silver all over the lake. I'm going up and gather a basketful.* So she had walked out on the party without even a goodbye, and here she was.

The crazy time, she thought; the mad time, and then she was running down across the lawn toward the lake. She stopped just at the water's edge, digging her heels into the sod to keep from plunging into the water.

The lake was like a sheet of glass. Tear it all up, she thought. Rip the surface like a cat tearing a silk pillow.

But the canoe was locked up in the boat house and she had no key.

She laughed. There was more than one way to tear a silk pillow. She stooped and caught the hem of her skirt. A lithe movement and she was wearing a bra and panties. She wriggled out of the bra and threw it high in the air. It caught on a bush and hung white in the moonlight. A moment's hesitation. Then the panties. They missed the bush, landed in the water and sent gentle ripples moving out to disturb the silver.

Lorelie laughed again, stretched her arms high over her head, and looked down at her reflection in the water. Then she dove, a slim white arrow blending with the satin and silver.

It was like diving into a barrel of champagne. The cold water chilled her skin deliciously and sent her into long clean movements as she headed for a rock she knew on the other side of the lake.

She was tired when she gained the rock. She pulled herself out of the water and stretched out full length to rest. A naked nymph.

She had been lying thus for several minutes, when something caught her eye; a movement on the shore nearby.

She was not alone.

Her first instinct was to seek shelter in the lake—to hide her nakedness. But something, possibly a deeper instinct, held her motionless and she stilled even the movement of her rising and falling breasts. It was one thing to bay at the moon and tear off one's clothing when quite alone, but it was another to get caught on a lake at midnight without a stitch.

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Lorelie did not have to move her head to see the intruder. He was a young man and he stood clearly visible about thirty yards down the shore. He had blond, shining hair and he wore slacks and a high turtle-neck sweater. He had come silently from somewhere and now stood looking down into the water. Knowing that he had not seen her, Lorelie began to hope. Maybe he would go away. If he caught sight of her she could always tumble into the lake and head for home. She lay there, feeling like a nude sprawled at the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway at high noon. She upbraided herself for throwing away her bra and panties.

The young man did not look in her direction. She kept her eyes on him; saw him look up at the moon, gaze out across the water. She could even see the smile of satisfaction on his face.

Her fears quieted somewhat. Evidently he was just a young man caught up in the same emotions that had brought her up to the lodge and into the lake. Maybe he had a tom-cat's urge to tear a silk pillow. Lorelie smiled faintly. Was he also going to—?

No. Without even removing his shoes, he raised his arms and dived expertly, causing hardly a splash on the surface of the lake.

Lorelie's smile deepened. Evidently young men weren't as immodest as young women. She lay waiting. Nothing happened. The lake surface quieted. The scattered silver drifted back into the quiet patterns originated by the moon. Time passed.

Lorelie sat up. The smile was gone. A frown had taken its place. Why didn't the young man come up? Was he swimming under water? A possibility, but how long could he remain submerged? Lorelie was sure that five minutes had passed.

Had he surfaced beyond range of her vision? Not possible. The moon was bright and she could see in all directions, far beyond the distance a person could swim under water.

The ominous lake, now.

Lorelie's mind took a new turn. He'd dived in without taking off his clothes. That could mean suicide!

Forgetting her nakedness, she went into the water like an eel. A dozen strokes took her to the spot where the young man had disappeared. She took a deep breath, flipped over, and dived, her slim

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legs going straight down into the water.

Again the silver was dispersed into fragments. Again, the ripples quieted and the moon gathered back its treasure.

Time passed and no living thing presented itself except a deer that came to drink and shake its antlers and fade again into the woods.

Not a breath of air stirred and the lake was glassy and beautiful; the deadly lake that had swallowed two and seemed to be quietly waiting for more.

Late the following afternoon, a blond young man wearing slacks, a sport jacket, and a turtle-neck sweater, got off a train at Grand Central station and took a cab acrosstown.

As he rode through the heavy traffic, there was a continued uneasiness about him. He kept moving from one side of the cab to the other—looking out the windows as though the vehicle were a trap from which he could not escape.

From a distance, the young man's broad shoulders and trim physique and thick golden hair, gave an impression of good looks. A close inspection of his features, however, revealed this to be untrue. The bone structure of his face was rather narrow. His nose jutted forward and his cheeks slanted back weakly on either side. His eyes, wide-set, were placed on the two diverging planes in a manner giving the impression they watched both sides of the street, leaving his nose to take care of anything straight ahead. His mouth, too, was narrow, and it opened in an odd gasping manner.

The cab pulled up in front of the *Federated Broadcasting Building*. The young man went directly to the fifth floor. He did not hesitate, but he moved nonetheless like a prisoner going to his own execution. He stood finally before the desk of a small, fierce-faced man upon whose door was stenciled: *Bramwell Tate —President.*

Tate would have caught anyone's eye and caused them to think: Here is a man of courage. This, because he sat encased in a bulky framework that encircled his neck and terminated in a cushion upon which his chin rested; the sort of brace used by those unfortunates who experience spinal injury and still have the determination to carry on.

Tate stared balefully at the young man. He glanced at a memo on his desk. "Your name is Roderick." It was a

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statement rather than a question.

"Yes sir."

"You know why you are here?"

"Yes sir."

"Why?"

"I am allowed to appeal the judgement against me."

"And what was the judgement?"

"Execution."

"I will hear your appeal."

Roderick's mouth formed into the gasping contour. "I beg another chance."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I can think of nothing else."

"You can present no mitigating circumstances?"

"None."

"Quite naturally. There was none. In one stupid moment, you jeopardized a work that began before you were born. Your action amounted to treachery. Secrecy has been our watchword from the beginning. Even the faintest rumor of our plans would destroy us."

"Yes sir."

Tate studied Roderick. For a moment there was a touch of sympathy in his eyes. Then it vanished. "Why did you do as you did?"

"There seemed no other course. She was suddenly there—"

"Obviously. But you should have seen her earlier and taken precautions. She could not have materialized out of thin air."

"That is true. I must have been absent-minded. But I was so glad to get back."

"You could have avoided her easily. We can only decide that you were criminally careless."

"As I said—I was so glad to get back."

There was a full minute of silence. Then Tate said, "I can find no mitigating circumstances. The damage you caused can be grave. Saul Gainer is a rich and influential man. He will spend money." Tate gazed balefully at the marine scene—a striking mural—that covered the far wall of his office. "He will raise a wind and muddy the waters."

"That is true. I can only ask that I be spared to redouble my efforts. I seek only to serve the Cause."

"Denied," Tate said. "You will go to the place of execution, there to be waited upon by those who will put the sentence into action."

As though upon signal, a door opened and two grim-faced young men entered.

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They wore slacks, sport jackets, and turtle-neck sweaters. Except for darker shades of hair, they looked a great deal like the domed Roderick. They ranged themselves on either side of him and waited.

Tate was studying the prisoner. He noted an increased nervousness. He said, "Before you take him back, you'd better get him a room here in the hotel and let him take a bath."

Roderick smiled. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

Shortly after noon on the following day, Nicholas (Skat) Carmody returned to his lower Manhattan office after spending the morning trailing a brokerage house messenger to see how he was spending his time. The brokerage house had paid a few dollars to learn that he was stopping off in several handy taverns along the way.

Skat hated that sort of work, but things had been slow and there was the rent and sundry expenses. So he was in a bad mood when he picked up the phone to check his answering service. "Any calls, glamorous?"

The reply was bedroomy. "A Mr. Frank Carney. He wants you to call him at—"

"I know. He wants his rent."

"You're overdue with us, too, precious."

"Fancy that. Anything else?"

"Yes. A Mr. Saul Gainer."

Skat showed abrupt interest. "Did you say, Saul Gainer?"

"That's right. He isn't by any chance, the filthy-rich tycoon who—?"

"I wouldn't know. Did he leave a number?"

"No. He just said you were to call at his office in the Wellington Building as soon as possible."

"Hmmm. Like that, huh?"

"Just like that. He sounded like a Cossack general."

"A Cossack general with a lot of money. If anything pans out, I'll buy you a drink."

"I could use one."

Half an hour later, Skat adjusted his tie as he was directed through a private door by a pensive chick who seemed fascinated by the prize fighter's dip in his otherwise straight Roman nose.

Saul Gainer was a scowling, beetle-browed man who could have doubled for John L. Lewis. He wasted no time with formalities. "You're Carmody?"

"That's right."

"Sit down."

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While Skat rounded the desk toward the chair Gainer indicated, the latter's steel-gray eyes appeared to take his blood pressure, check his heart, and X-ray him for any minor defects.

"You called me," Skat said.

"I've got some work for you."

"If it's anything I can handle, I'm your man."

"I want you to find my daughter."

"Your daughter?"

"You seem surprised."

"I am, rather."

"Why?"

"You're a pretty big man, Mr. Gainer. If your daughter is missing, I'd imagine it would be in the papers. I read the papers. I've seen nothing of it."

"We've been able to keep it quiet. The police know, of course."

"And the FBI?"

"On a standby basis. They have no right to move in unless there's proof of kidnaping. I'm seeing to it that they stick to the exact letter of the law."

"I'd think you'd want them on the case."

Gainer scowled. "My daughter's safety comes first. If there are kidnapers, I don't want them frightened. They might get panicky and kill her."

"Have the police made any headway?"

"None."

Skat frowned and Gainer was efficient at reading expressions. "There is a question in your mind?" he asked.

"You're right. I'm trying to figure out why you, a man with unlimited money, would call a small operator like myself in so important a situation. It seems to me you'd go to the biggest agency in the country. There are outfits in New York that could put fifty men on the case."

"A fair question. I don't happen to feel that bigness is desirable in this type of operation. I see an army of men tramping all over the landscape, tripping each other up, competing, messing it up generally."

"It's a point of view. I don't necessarily agree that it's the right one. May I ask why you selected me?"

"Mrs. Henrietta Dover is a friend of mine. You found her dog. She mentioned it at the time."

Skat winced at the flat way in which Gainer put it. Without the details, it hardly sounded like a recommendation. There had been details, however. The dog was Cham-

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pion Raeburn Pine-Hill Saxon, a pure bred collie worth a fortune. The robbery had been perpetrated by some pretty serious minded racketeers, and Skat had three knife scars to prove it. "Mrs. Dover was very kind."

"You'll take the case, then?"

"I'll do my level best. I'm afraid I'll require a retainer, though." Not because I don't trust you. I just happen to be stone broke."

Gainer snorted. "I like frankness. On your way out, stop at my cashier's window and draw what you need."

"That leaves just one thing. Tell me about your daughter."

Gainer reached into his desk and took out a cigar and lit it. "Night before last, Lorelie had a few friends in. I got home about nine o'clock and saw her dancing as I went through to my room. I haven't seen her since."

"Where do you live, Mr. Gainer?"

"We have an apartment on East 69th Street. My wife and Lorelie and I. She is our only child."

"I see. Obviously, Lorelie left the apartment before you got up yesterday morning."

Sally, the maid said that she saw Lorelie leave about eleven o'clock."

"Alone?"

"Yes. The group was small and Sally said the others remained. The police checked each guest yesterday and are convinced that Lorelie went out alone."

"She didn't mention having an appointment?"

"No."

"If she had an appointment, would she have been likely to mention it to any of the servants — or to her mother?"

Gainer thought for a moment. "Possibly — possibly not."

Skat didn't bother asking about hospitals or morgues. He knew the police would have made the routine investigations.

"Has your daughter been in good spirits lately?"

"The police asked that, too. Let me say this. Neither my wife, nor I, nor any of the servants, nor—so far as we can learn—any of her friends, knew of any trouble. She was entirely herself. She had nothing on her mind that any of us knew about."

"Then there is nothing more you can tell me?"

"There's a little more. We have a country place about sixty miles north — up in Dutchess County. About eighty acres of woods, a small private lake, and a lodge. The

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police checked it as a matter of routine."

"But your daughter wasn't there?"

"No. There was evidence, though that she'd been there. The front door of the lodge stood open. So far as I know, it had previously been locked. Also, on the shore of the lake they found a pair of shoes that have been identified as belonging to Lorelie."

When Gainer hesitated momentarily, Skat asked, "Anything else?"

"Possibly. They found a—a brassiere hanging from a bush, and a pair of panties in the water close to the shore. These garments may have belonged to Lorelie, but unfortunately, we didn't keep a record of her undergarments. The police are trying to establish ownership of the garments now."

"What condition were they in?"

"Condition?"

"I mean—did they show any sign of violence. Did they appear to have been torn from her body?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"If your daughter did go to the lodge, how would she have gotten there?"

"She drove a blue Chevrolet convertible. Her own car. It was not found at the lodge. It hasn't been found anywhere."

"What about tire tracks?"

"None was found but that is not indicative. The road to the lodge is black hardtop. The ramp into the garage is cement."

Skat got to his feet. "Thanks, Mr. Gainer. I'll report to you as soon as I turn something up."

He went downstairs and bought a pack of cigarettes at the lobby stand. He went out in the street and lit one. Now for the leg work, he thought; the drudgery not recorded in the stories of the fictional private detective. First to the Gainer home. A talk with Mrs. Gainer. Question the servants. Get a list of the party guests. Look them up.

He stopped on the next corner and took out a picture Gainer had given him. Attractive chick. Real sex-maniac bait. Rape, elopement, amnesia, boredom. Sixty roads to town.

He walked on, deep in thought, and when he looked up again he was standing in the waiting room of Grand Central Station. He went to the information booth and got a time table. Then he bought a ticket on a northbound train.

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Bramwell Tate sat behind his desk in his private office and looked at the group seated around him. They were oddly similar. They all wore slacks, sport jackets, and turtle-neck sweaters. They all had the appearance of youth in their wedge-shaped faces.

Without preamble, Tate said, "Roderick has been executed."

There was no reaction from the group, no change of expression as they sat in silence, waiting for Tate to continue. Tate said, "Unfortunately, the damage he did lives on, the second blot on our record of complete secrecy. Fortunately the defection comes near the end of our preparation period. Twenty years ago, it could have been fatal to our cause. As it works out, we are able to advance our time table and proceed with Schedule Two." Tate paused to let the words sink in, then he went on. "All of you were born on this planet, from ova transmitted from the mother-world. From germination, you have been trained for one purpose—to serve the Cause. No effort was made to give you background detail of our vast effort. It is not necessary to understand a cause in order to serve it. One of the requirements of complete loyalty is that it should be above need of reason."

The young men sat silent. Tate regarded them almost fondly. Then the personal light faded from his hard, cold eyes. He continued: "But, because you will be battalion leaders in the second phase of our conquest, it has been decreed that you be given something of its background."

"We are indeed privileged, sir," one of the young men said.

"Do not interrupt. As you of course know, we are basically an acquatic species, and the homeland you never knew, was an acquatic planet. However, over one hundred years ago, our doom was foreshadowed in an equation worked out by the great scientists of our civilization. They proved that water vapor was escaping from our world into space; that within one hundred and fifty years our planet would be arid.

"Fortunately, our science had advanced to a point where we could examine and test planets several systems away. Some were found which qualified as water planets, but this was the only one which had a static envelope to which we could attach transmutation equipment. That meant

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of course, that it also had animal life and—as it developed—a civilization which in itself presented a barrier. In short, the planet would have to be conquered rather than merely occupied.

"The first contact was difficult. The technical process would mean nothing to you, so let me describe it thus: For several long years, electromagnetic beams were hurled from our world toward this planet. Of the millions thrown, not more than a thousand made contact. Of this thousand, many were lost on dry land; others hooked on at points impractical for exploitation.

"Of the very few satisfactory casts, one was chosen for the original transmutation, and the first entity was disintegrated on our planet, hurled across space, and reformed on this one."

Bramwell Tate paused to shift the pressure of the frame he wore. The group gave him its silent, rapt attention. He went on. "That first invader was a genius to whom monuments will one day be erected. The difficulties he encountered and overcame are almost inconceivable. He not only survived, but he was able to study the dominating life form of this world. He found a location for the first transmutation equipment we sent him; he assembled it, and received transmutation of ova.

"He obtained for us the body of an entity from this planet and transmuted it to us for study. Thus, we were able to repattern the genes of our own ova so that our bodies would assume the form demanded by the evolution of this planet."

The flat, staring eyes of the young men glowed ecstatically as the story unfolded. They leaned forward, a tense, worshiping group. Bramwell, satisfied with the effect of his narration, said, "With contact made, we used the intervening years, to install the vast equipment that, when the moment comes, will transmute not mere ova, but thousands upon thousands of our brothers—fully formed and ready to take over this world.

"We have also set up the devices through which avenues of attack will be provided for you and your brothers. These avenues must, of course, consist of water. When we strike, we will be swift and merciless. We will take over the United States. Using it as a beachhead, we will stream north and south

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and east and west. With mobile equipment, we will fling chaos ahead of us and in a short time, we will be the masters of this planet."

Tate's voice had become more and more emotional as he built toward his climax and the last words were uttered as both a declaration of triumph and a fervent prayer. Here indeed, was a dedicated man — if he and the members of his group could actually be called men.

The group arose spontaneously, as a gesture of tribute. Then Tate slipped back into his cold shell and eyed them with grim impersonality. "That will be all. Go back to your posts. Await your orders."

They filed out, their mouths opening in that odd gasping manner so reminiscent of a trout surfacing to snatch a fly.

Skat Carmody had hired a car from a garage in the small town where he had left the train, and was now standing on the porch of the Gainer lodge. He crossed the lawn, walked down to the shore and stood looking across the water. The sun was high, the lake glittered, and Skat was struck by the fact that here, a scant sixty miles north of Times Square — one of the busiest metropolitan sections in the world — was country where deer came down to the shore to drink.

Casual conversations in the town where he had rented his car revealed other data of interest. Back in these hills were people who lived and died without ranging twenty miles from their birthplace. They were called "hillbillies" by the townspeople and were regarded with a mixture of affection and contempt. They were a stiff-necked, independent lot to whom game laws were unknown. They shot deer whenever they needed meat. Took pheasant and bass and restricted game wherever they found them. Many of them could neither read nor write, but some of their ancestors had taken the land from the Indians and had held it against both the French and the British.

The garageman had said, "Just start walking, mister. You'll bump into them up in the hills, but they'll see you before you see them. Why are you so interested in hillbillies, anyhow?"

Skat moved around the lower end of the lake to the far side and disappeared into the trees. In one hand, he carried a stout stick and with the

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other he steadied the quart of rye whiskey he was carrying in his jacket pocket. At the top of the next knoll he stopped and opened the bottle and took a stiff shot. It didn't taste very good. He was not in the mood for really serious drinking.

An hour's walk carried him in a semicircle and into a thickly wooded area just beyond the boundary of the Gainer property and not far from the north end of the lake. He saw a small clearing ahead. He approached it and found himself looking at as miserable a residence as he'd ever beheld; a small weather-beaten shack consisting of old discarded boards, a few logs, jagged sections of tarpaper. A piece of galvanized sewer pipe served as chimney.

Stepping into the clearing, Skat casually lifted the bottle from his pocket and tilted it high for a second drink. He peered at the house, swayed slightly, and called out, "Anybody home?"

There was no response, but Skat had already spotted the eyes peering through a slit in the wall of the shack.

Skat stared dully for a few moments, then turned in a wide circle and walked to the edge of the clearing. But instead of leaving, he looked at the bottle, sat down on a fallen log and lifted it again.

He drank sparingly, but took a long time for so small a drink. Then he sat staring at the bottle, apparently lost in a world of his own.

Five minutes passed before the door of the shack creaked and an apparition appeared; a bearded, ragged scarecrow of a man who carried a rifle. He made no effort to hide his suspicion and hostility.

Skat ignored the man. He patted the bottle and grinned at it affectionately. The man came nearer—slowly, until he was standing over Skat. The latter looked up, blinked stupidly, and said, "H u l l o. Where'd you come from? Live around here?"

The scarecrow showed jagged, yellow teeth. "You blind? That's my house you're lookin' at."

"What house?"

"That house — right there" The man pointed with his rifle.

"That dump?"

"Nobody drug you out here!"

Skat squinted elaborately at the rifle. "Fire that thing and I'll bet it'd backfire and blow your head off."

The hillbilly eyed him speculatively. "Wanna bet?" He

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was looking now at the whiskey bottle.

"Betcha you can't fire it and hit yourself right between the eyes. Betcha a million dollars."

The hillbilly raised the rifle to his shoulder. As he did so, Skat held out the bottle. "Better have a drink first. You won't be in any shape after you're dead."

"I don't drink with strangers."

"Okay," Skat said cheerfully, and calmly pulled the bottle back.

"But as long as you're invitin' me." He took the bottle and sat down beside Skat on the log. He drank deeply, wiped his mouth and handed the bottle back. "That's a right potent callin' card you got there, mister."

"Name's Skat."

"Funny handle. Mine's Dillard."

"Pleased," Skat mumbled. He raised the bottle and peered at it. Checking the size of Dillard's drink, he figured he could get the rest of it into the hillbilly in about forty-five minutes. He tilted the bottle himself and gurgled convincingly but no liquor escaped the neck. He held it out to Dillard who was not backward.

Dillard wiped his mouth and said, "Want to go in and set a spell?"

"It's nice out here. No use dirtying up your floors."

"Aint washed 'em in thirty years."

"Was that when you built it?"

"Uh-huh. Right after my pappy burnt hisself to death in the old one. Got liquored up and knocked the stove over."

"Who was your mammy?"

Dillard thought it over. He took a long drink to stir his memory, but it was no use. "Can't say. She left a long time ago. Heard she got a job in an eatin' place down on the highway. She never came back."

"How could she tear herself away?" Skat asked, closing one eye and studying the house with the other.

"She was flip, pappy said. Liked good times."

"Have another drink."

"Don't mind at all. Got a little spring chill in my windpipe. A tiny bit o' owl juice helps such things."

"You aint just hootin', chum."

Dillard wiped his mouth and waggled a cagey finger. "Bet you're out here lookin' for that gal that's missin'."

"What gal?"

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"The one with the rich pappy. Old man owns Lake Duval."

"How'd you find out she's missing?"

"Word get's around. They was troopers all over the place. Came up here to talk to me."

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. I just wasn't to home. Don't like troopers nosin' around."

The troopers may have passed this old coot up, Skat thought, but the FBI would not.

"Planned on shootin' me one, but they was too many."

"You make a practice of shooting people?"

"Don't like snoopers."

"You didn't shoot me."

"You was carryin' the bottle, friend. You might o' busted it fallin'."

Skat passed the bottle again. He said, "Heard about that girl disappearing, but she was never even up here."

Dillard finished his drink before he snorted. "Like hell she wasn't!"

"You saw her?"

"Naked as a skinned rabbit standin' by the lake over there."

"What happened to her?"

"Dunno. Disgusted me, it did. I come on home."

"Maybe she just went swimming and then started back to New York."

"Maybe. I come out about dawn for a breakfast rabbit and her car was gone."

It seemed to be a blind alley, but Skat got a certain satisfaction out of having established at least one fact. The girl had been at the lodge. But had she left naked? Possibly, after swimming she slipped on her dress over nothing at all. This hardly seemed likely.

Skat asked, "You think maybe she was drowned?"

Dillard wiped the dribblings of a fresh drink from his beard and shook his head. "Naw! The troopers drug the two deep spots in the lake. She wasn't there."

"What about the rest of it?"

"They paddled around for hours. Water's real clear in Lake Duval. You can see the bottom. Nope. She didn't drownd."

Dillard was now maudlin drunk. He flapped a hand on Skat's knee. "You're m'friend, friend. M'real friend. You jus' stick with me. We'll kill us a trooper or maybe a turtle-neck. Anyway, we'll kill us somethin'."

"What's a turtle-neck?"

Dillard put a dirty finger

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beside his nose and winked. "Young fellers that skitter around the woods once in a while. Got thick hair. Wear high collars on their sweaters. Think nobody sees 'em, but I do. They go swimmin' in the lake with all their clothes left on."

Skat looked at Dillard with calculated admiration. "Say, nothing much gets past you, does it?"

"I wasn't born blindfolded," Dillard said modestly.

"These young men—where do they come from? Where do they go?"

"Dunno where they come from. They go into the lake."

"Yes, but when they come out of the lake where do they go?"

"Never saw one come out."

"You mean they just dive in and stay there?"

"Wouldn't say that. They're only around at night. They prob'ly come out some place."

"Mighty interesting."

Dillard picked up the bottle. "Almost empty."

"Finish it. Lots more where that came from. Now about these young men—"

Dillard finished the bottle. He set it down and wiped his beard and smiled vaguely as though softly remembering long-gone days. "Yep. Right sneaky lads. Killed one once."

Skat did a double take. "You—killed one?"

"Uh-huh. Long time ago. I was out coon huntin'. Mistook him for a varmint. Only mistake o' that kind I ever made."

"Then what happened?"

"I was pretty worried. Figured the troopers would be nosin' around. It worked out all right, though. Somebody took the 'sponsibility off my shoulders."

"How so?"

"Well, I buried him. Did it real careful, too. Down deep, and then I set the sod back in. Didn't think anybody'd ever spot the place. But they did."

"Who did?"

"Don't know. Never found out. I checked a week later and the grave was dug up and the body was gone. That kind of scared me. Figured the troopers had found me out for sure. Walked mighty careful for a while."

"And then—?"

Dillard shrugged. "Nothin'. Time passed and nobody bothered me."

Skat studied the hillbilly for some moments. "I think you're just talking. I don't think you ever killed anybody in your life."

He had expected Dillard to flare up, but this was not the

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case. Dillard thought it over quietly and said, "Nope. I aint no liar. Even when I drink I aint no liar."

"Can you prove you killed this man?"

"I can show you the grave —where it's all dug up again. Grown over some in ten years, but it's still there."

"Not proof. Just a hole in the ground."

"I can show you the book."

"What book?"

"Funny little book I took off the lad. He had some money and I took that too— figurin' he'd not have no further use for it. Can't show you the money. Spent that. But I can show you the book. Little black one in a rubber bag. Still got it in the house."

"I'd be mighty proud to have a look at that book," Skat said.

Dillard looked at him with bleary suspicion. "You sure you don't pal around with no troopers?"

"Me? I hate troopers. They killed my daddy and then made my poor mammy pay for the funeral. I hate troopers."

"Just the kind of a trick they'd pull. Come on."

Dillard got up and weaved toward the hovel. He pulled the door open and held it for Skat. The latter took a step forward and was hit by a solid wall of stench that made his stomach quiver. "You go in and get it, pal. I'll wait here."

The door closed and Skat heard Dillard rummaging around inside. While he waited, he considered the weird turn the case had taken. He had come in search of information concerning Lorelie Gainer and had accidently turned up an old murder. Or had he? Could it be possible that this illiterate, with nothing more to his name than alcoholic ambitions, could slay a man and get away with it? Probably not, so Skat allowed himself no optimism while Dillard rummaged around in the cabin. He had to concede, though, that this was good country for a murder. There were a lot of places to play "hide the body" with the state troopers and local officials.

Dillard emerged with a look of smug satisfaction above his dirty beard. He held out a small, flat package. "There you are if you think I'm lyin'."

Skat took the package and found that the odd, zipper-type device at one end opened easily. The bag seemed a mixture of onion skin and rubber. The notebook he took from it

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was black-leather bound and in perfect condition.

He opened it to find half its pages unused. The rest were covered with handwriting.

Skat closed the book and asked, "What'll you take for this! I'd like to buy it. Always had a weakness for note books. I collect them."

Dillard was wary. "Don't think I ought to let it get away."

But Skat knew immediately, that he was going to get the book; also, that anyone approaching this character in the right way could have had it years before. He said, "It's worth twenty dollars to me. That'd buy — let's see — that would buy four bottles like the one we just emptied."

"Hmmm. M i g h t y n i c e liquor."

Skat pressed a bill into his hand. "Well, you just head for the nearest country tavern and tell 'em I sent you and not to give you anything but the best."

Dillard's hand closed over the bill. "Yeah—mighty nice liquor."

It was just sundown when Skat got back to the Gainer lodge. He used the key Gainer had given him and found that the lights were functioning. He sat down on a lounge that probably cost all he would make in an average year, and opened the black book.

The first page was covered with scrawlings Skat would have attributed to a four-year-old child; meandering lines, a crude picture of a house with a chimney, two windows, and a crude figure in the front yard.

Skat turned the page and found some slight progress in the supposed child. Here were s i m p l e, one-syllable words lettered out with much labor. The word *fish* appeared several times. Swim was spelled with a double *m*. There were other words including *fin* and *lake*.

The next page showed even more progress; longer and more complicated words written out in script. The handwriting, Skat felt, indicated a child of twelve or thirteen.

Skat moved on, bewildered, but fascinated. Sentences now; continuity in word and thought: *The language is not difficult. . . . We are all dedicated to the Cause. . . . I am fortunate to have been born on this planet because millions are waiting at home for the signal. I am a pioneer and will be honored. I will be one of the conquerors. . . .*

There were two pages of

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these cryptic statements. Then the handwriting improved further. Also, the copy: *Today, I am five years old, an adult, and have been given important duties in the master control room. Before being assigned, I was taken, with two others, on a tour of the Duval base. We were shown things and places that only adult graduates are permitted to see; only those who survive the hatching, live through the harsh primary periods, and are finally chosen as worthy and able.*

Skat turned a page. Now there was better form to the writing. It no longer sprawled and meandered.

Our science is far more advanced than theirs. They have no conception of the transmutation of matter. Emotion still dominates them, clouding all their decisions. There are many conflicting sects called nations on the planet. These sects war with each other. This hostility is nurtured by their leaders—of which there are many—who strive to maintain a balance of power around the planet — among the sects. . . .

Appalled, Skat rushed on through the pages, skimming over some of the copy, seeking out the most startling statements.

These things, I am not supposed to know. But I have resolved to gain any knowledge that I can, by whatever means. Then if invasion takes place in my lifetime, chance may vest me with the high role for which I am preparing myself. It is not hard to gain knowledge, because none of the leaders dream that I seek it. No one born to the service ranks ever aspires for knowledge beyond their level. It is unheard of. Then why do I seek it? This, I think, is the reason: Having been hatched on this planet from ova transmutated from our own world, I had no way of knowing, until recently, that my physical form differs from that of my brothers on the home planet. Their bodies would not be practical here. After the first transmutation was made, the new form was designed and the genes were changed in the ova before it was transmuted. Thus, the later natives had bodies in which they could move about unsuspected and carry on the work of invasion. All this took a long time, of course. And I am sad when I realize that even my fifteen-year life span may be over before we are ready to take over this planet. I shall

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study and learn, though, and gather knowledge, because when my form was changed to that of these earthlings, something they possess was given to me. Ambition. It must come with the body, or else I was given something of their mind structure.

Amazed as he was, Skat could not help thinking of the irony of this. An ambitious invader — possibly the only one endowed with an individual desire to improve himself —casually eliminated by the bullet of a drunken hillbilly. Dillard had unknowingly done his share in repelling the invaders.

The invaders! Skat sat back and contemplated the term. Could it be possible? Or was this a hoax of some kind? It implied a deadly, slow, deliberate effort that had been carried on under the noses of heaven knew how many people? An impossibility! Or was it? Skat returned his attention to the book.

An effort was made to gain ownership of Lake Duval, our transmuter base, but it was not for sale and the leader did not wish to risk calling attention to us by pressing the matter. The leader is great and wise indeed. He has heavy responsibilities. A network of radio transmission towers must be acquired along the coasts of the country. They are necessary in order to arrange for the pattern of chaos that must be developed before the mass transmutations begin. I do not know what form this chaos will take, but I have learned that it will serve a double purpose. It will demoralize the natives of this nation, and will furnish highways along which our warriors can move from the transmutation tanks here at Lake Duval and bring the nation into subjection. All will be slain, as we have no use for them. This, too, will serve a double purpose. It will rid us of a vast population we do not want, and it will terrorize the people on the rest of the planet and make them easy prey for our ever-widening attack once we have wiped out resistance here in the greatest nation of the planet, I will continue to gain knowledge, hoping that I will be called on to serve....

Skat read on. Later, he closed the book and sat looking at its black cover. Then he got up and began pacing the floor. . . .

Lorelie Gainer opened her eyes. She saw only a blur. She squeezed her eyelids together, then opened them again,

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striving for focus. There was a feeling within her of having been drugged as the blur coagulated into walls, a ceiling, a cot.

The room was small, not more than twelve by twelve, with walls of a strange metal that gave off a glow. There were no windows, but the glow provided an even, shadowless illumination.

Nor was there a door. But as Lorelie sat up and put her feet on the floor, a section of the wall slid down into the floor and a young man stepped into the room.

This focused Lorelie's numbed mind sharply and she realized, with horror, that she was still completely naked. She clawed down in panic for a blanket or a sheet—some form of covering—but there was none. Only a plastic-covered pallet softened the hard smooth surface of the narrow cot.

The young man stood staring with his arms folded. Lorelie cringed back and used her own arms to the best advantage possible. She said, "Please—have you no decency?"

The young man regarded her soberly. He seemed puzzled by her confusion. Then his homely, hatchet-face lightened. "Oh, I understand. You feel uncomfortable because your body lacks covering."

His own body was much like Lorelie's—in fact, it appeared to be identical. But his instincts were alien and he could not understand modesty as demonstrated by these beings. He studied Lorelie with the same impersonality with which he would have regarded a stone or any other inanimate object, and even in her fear and bewilderment, Lorelie's instincts told her that she held no physical attractions whatever for this young man.

This was scant comfort, however. "Please, can't I have something to wear?"

"Why?"

"Why! Because—well, you have clothes on, haven't you?"

The young man shrugged and went back through the doorway. He reappeared a few moments later and tossed Lorelie a gray, turtle-neck sweater.

"That's — that's not quite enough."

He frowned. The process was repeated. This time he brought a pair of gray slacks. Lorelie had already donned the sweater. She slipped into the slacks, striving to cover herself as much as possible during the process.

"Where am I?"

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"Don't you remember coming here?"

"I remember—" Lorelie passed a hand over her forehead. "I remember that I'd come up to Lake Duval and that I — I went swimming. There was a man — he looked a lot like you. He dived into the lake. I thought—"

"What did you think?"

"That he was in trouble. I —I don't remember anything else."

"If you had minded your own business you would not be in trouble now."

"You haven't told me where I am."

He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

"In the long run, it will make no difference."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Kill you, I imagine. In fact, I can't understand why you are still alive. Maybe the leaders want to ask you some questions."

"But why — what have I done to you?"

The young man regarded her somberly. "You haven't done anything, but you've got to die—all of you. We've got to get rid of you. We need this planet."

He turned and left the room. The wall section slid up out of the floor—back into place.

"Look at this passage," Skat said. He was standing beside Saul Gainer's desk pointing at a page in the black book. Gainer was staring at the page but did not appear to see it. Skat read:

"Both the radio tower chain and the master unit at Lake Duval are necessary in bringing about the pattern of chaos. Then, when the time is right, the Lake Duval transmutation unit will bring our invasion troops from the mother planet at a rate approaching one thousand per hour. They have already been hatched from the corrected genes and will use the reservoir system to move down upon the City of New York. . . ."

Saul Gainer had listened in silence to Skat's story, giving him ample time to explain in detail and present the complete picture of his investigations. Now he turned quietly on Skat and said, "This is fantastic! It's beyond my ability to grasp!"

"It set me back on my heels too, sir."

"I don't think we're talking about the same thing. What I'm trying to figure out

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is why you would come here and try to sell me such pack of lies. What's in it for you? What do you get out of fabricating all this nonsense? I sent you out to find my daughter and you come back with a tale that would have been beyond Jules Verne in his palmiest days. I'm used to thinking along the lines of cause and effect, so the question in my mind is *why?*"

Skat realized that Gainer had listened too calmly—with far too much polite attention. "Then you don't believe—"

Gainer hurled the book across the room. "I can only decide that you're out of your mind. You certainly didn't think this cock-and-bull story would make me forget your complete failure in locating Lorelie, do you? I'm only wondering if there aren't some criminal charges I can bring against you. The fact that you'll lose your license doesn't seem enough."

Skat walked over and picked up the book. "Mr. Gainer, I think it's quite evident what's happened to your daughter. Somehow, she got in the way of these people—or creatures, or whatever they are—and had to be taken out of circulation. She may not even be alive now. But I tell you that this book is *not* a fabrication. Can't you understand? It's too fantastic to be false. Your instincts should tell you that!"

"I know only that my daughter is missing and that you've wasted valuable time—time I paid you for—my time—"

"There's more that I haven't told you," Skat said desperately. "If that radio chain didn't exist, I might be inclined to feel as you do—that all this is an elaborate hoax. But it does exist. Before I came here, I checked and found that the Federated Broadcasting Company fills the bill exactly. Its stations stretch from Massachusetts southward—right down the coast to Florida. They cover the gulf from Texas to Alabama, and they run from Oregon to California on the Pacific side."

"Mr. Carmody, I've heard enough!"

"The president and founder is a man named Bramwell Tate, who—"

Gainer jerked his head up sharply. His expression made Skat pause. Gainer said, "Tate? Bramwell Tate?"

"That's right."

"Odd—very odd—"

"What do you mean?"

Gainer got up from his

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chair and went to a file cabinet against the wall behind his desk. He opened a drawer and rummaged through some papers. He took out a letter and examined it.

"Do you know Tate?" Skat asked.

"No. I've met him, though. Years ago, he tried to buy Lake Duval from me."

Skat snatched at the opportunity. "Of course! That's their headquarters. They'd want to own it. Don't you see now that we've stumbled on the truth?"

"I see no such thing. What kind of a detective are you, anyhow?" Gainer sat back and regarded Skat appraisingly. "I think you honestly do believe all this yourself. But that only highlights your immaturity. How you ever got to be a detective is beyond me."

Skat got up from his chair. "I can't blame you much for not believing me. You've had too much thrown at you in too short a time. So I'm dropping your case—"

"You're not dropping it, Carmody. You're being booted off of it."

"All right. I'm being booted off of it. But I'm taking on a bigger job."

"What's that?"

"Making somebody believe me before it's too late."

As Skat left, Gainer stared after him, shaking his head slowly.

Skat walked several blocks before he turned into a tavern and ordered a double rye. He sat looking at himself in the mirror. Was Gainer right? he wondered. Was he really losing his grip? Up there in the hills things had been different. The lake and the forest and the brooding quiet — together with Dillard and his crazy shack — had created an atmosphere of credibility. That was about the only way he could explain it.

But here in a tavern in the heart of Manhattan, with modern, sensible people jostling each other as they went about their business, the atmosphere was far different. It shook even Skat's conviction. *How silly can you get?* He caught himself wondering this as he tossed off the rye and let it burn a path into his stomach. This was Manhattan. New York City. The biggest city in the world.

Nothing earth-shaking could happen here.

He felt better now; his only uneasiness the thought of having made a fool of himself in front of Gainer. Should he go

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back and try to patch things up? No. It wouldn't do any good. When you lose the confidence of a man like Gainer, it's gone for good.

He walked on, coming finally to a big marble facade and a shining copper plate: *Federated Broadcasting Building.* He went inside and looked at the directory. He found a name—*Bramwell Tate, President—507*—and got into an elevator. He got off at the fifth floor, went through a door and faced a lacquered blonde receptionist.

"I'd like to see Mr. Tate."

She regarded him with polite impersonality. "Have you an appointment?"

"No, but it's mighty damned important."

"I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Tate without an appointment."

"Why don't you ask him if he'll see me? My name is Nicholas Carmody."

"I'm afraid the name would make no difference."

"My business might, though."

"What is your business, Mr. Carmody?"

Skat took a deep breath. "Tell Mr. Tate I'm here because one of his boys goofed a while back and left a book telling all about Mr. Tate's plans. Tell him it was the man who got himself killed by a hillbilly up at Lake Duval."

The blonde had been taking the message down in shorthand. She looked at the pad and her eyes widened as they were raised to Carmody's face. She said, "Please wait a moment, Mr. Carmody," and got up from her chair and circled him warily to get to an inner door. She went through the door, giving Skat a backward glance as she closed it.

Skat sat down to wait. He waited seven minutes by his watch. The longer he waited, the greater became his confidence. Now, he was smiling. Tate had tipped his hand by not responding immediately—by not ordering him out, or having him thrown out as he would any crackpot. Skat visualized the panicked executive back there in his private office trying to decide what to do—figuring out what he would say before receiving the man who brought this news. His smile deepened and he apologized to himself for being a doubter.

The door opened. Skat arose to meet the blonde. She eyed him coldly and said, "Mr. Tate debated as to whether he should call the police. He decided against it and wishes me to inform you that you have three minutes to get out

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of the building.If you are still here after that time, he will have you arrested."

Skat sighed. "Some days just go bad right from the beginning, don't they, pet?"

Frost oozed from her matchless complexion. "I would suggest you leave."

Skat was back in the street, a sense of complete futility driving his spirits down. He thought, okay son. Rest on your laurels. Call the phone service and find out if somebody wants you to find a lost dog or tail a shoestring salesman. Anything to make a buck.

He dug a dime from his pocket and turned into a drug store. He found an empty booth and stepped inside. But, before he could close the door, a voice said. "I have a gun in your back. Step out quietly and walk through the door into the street. We'll be right behind you and we have orders to bring you alive or leave you dead."

A grin broke over Skat's face as he turned to face them; two narrow-faced young men in slacks, sport jackets, and turtle-neck sweaters. The hand of one was tilted suggestively in his jacket pocket. Skat said, "Well for heaven's sake! Why did you take so long? I was beginning to feel pretty lonely."

They both scowled. "We're not kidding," one of them said.

"I hope not. Let's go."

He walked between them up Madison Avenue. He hooked arms with them companionably and they could have been three friends going to lunch.

The one with the gun seemed puzzled. "You certainly take it big."

"Why not. I was beginning to feel neglected."

"Just a happy guy," the other sneered.

"Happier than I've been in days," Skat said. "Stop lagging back. We don't want to keep your boss waiting."

Bramwell Tate, looking gnomelike and misshapen in his neck brace awaited Skat in a room in the Winslow Hotel across the street from the Federated Broadcasting Company offices. As Skat entered, Tate eyed him somberly from the depths of a huge overstuffed chair.

Neither man spoke. Tate appeared to be considering; Skat, waiting. Finally, Skat said, "When does the meeting come to order?"

Tate scowled. "You're pret-

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ty cocky for a man in your position."

"I like my position."

"Really? What's so attractive about standing on the thin edge of death?"

"Now take it easy. Nobody's going to kill anybody."

"Why do you think you were brought here?"

"To be looked over. You wanted to see how dangerous I am."

"I'll be perfectly frank. I knew you were dangerous when my secretary brought in your message. Any man with the information you've gotten together is dangerous to me."

"I'll be frank too. When you refused to see me, I was left hanging high and dry. What I found out would be no good to me if I couldn't cash in on it."

Tate seemed puzzled. "You mean you weren't intending to go to the police?"

"How could I make a buck that way?"

"I think I'm beginning to understand. Your primary thought is—"

"You guessed it: What's in it for me?"

Tate leaned forward in his chair. "Exactly what *do* you know?"

"Enough to cause trouble. I talked to an old hillbilly at Lake Duval. I got the book he took from one of your men—the one he killed."

"That's the extent of your knowledge?"

"Extensive enough, don't you think?" Skat hoped Tate would think so—would not be smart enough to see that it was not sufficient to get any quick action from the authorities. He hadn't been able to lick this outfit, so his last hope was in joining it.

Tate said, "I don't know—" He got up and walked to the window, then turned. "We will have use for a certain number of defectionists, but I'd planned to pick them up later. There will be plenty to choose from."

Skat asked, "Just what is this chaos you're planning to bring about? How are you going to arrange it?"

Tate sat down again. "How would you like to go up to Lake Duval and find out? Our nerve center is located there. You're welcome to look it over."

Skat was encouraged, but he felt he should be suspicious. It would look more convincing. "What you're saying is that you want me to go quietly. You don't want a disturbance here. But you're not necessarily taking me on."

"Wouldn't I be foolish to accept you blindly?"

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"In your position, I think you have to."

"Oh, no. I can have you killed, here and now."

"Then you'd really be in trouble."

"I don't think so. It would be risky, but I think we could get away with it. We are pretty well organized. I think you would be wise to accept my invitation to Lake Duval."

The invitation was what Skat had hoped for. "Okay. I guess I haven't got much choice."

Skat rode north on the New York Central with the two young men. They were the silent types. They had nothing to say; they refused to be drawn into conversation. It was dark when they got off—pitch dark, the moon not having yet risen. The station was closed, a small, lonely place in the middle of nowhere. A black sedan was waiting.

It carried them north along dark, deserted, winding roads and stopped at a spot walled in on both sides by thick forest. As they got out, Skat realized how easily this operation could have been tracked down and uncovered if the right people had even a hint of its existence. If it was as big as he suspected, then there had been genius behind it. Taking the black book at face value, here was a giant conspiracy, stretching over years, greatening and broadening under a blanket of complete secrecy.

Its very absurdity, he realized, had been its greatest asset. Gainer, a shrewd, intelligent man, had laughed at him when he had tried to reveal it. Possibly others had laughed. Through skill, luck, or farsighted planning, all hint of it had been kept from those who would have been interested; would have followed up any lead, however absurd, where the security of the nation was involved.

Thinking along these lines, Skat had sudden misgivings. Had he acted correctly? Back in Manhattan, he had envisioned even the FBI receiving him politely and recommending psychiatric treatment. Now he knew he had been wrong. They would have been suspicious, but they would have followed through.

He had to reverse his course of action—and quickly. They were moving through thick woods in utter darkness. Obviously the two young men knew their way. They held Skat by either wrist, but lightly, and gave no indication that they considered him a prisoner.

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If only the damn moon would come up! But it hadn't, and Skat couldn't wait. He took a deep breath, set himself, and jerked both arms free. He whirled and followed through, swinging an accurate right at the chin of the man on the left. It connected. The man grunted and went down.

Skat whirled and dived at the other man. But he was too late; he flew through space and landed heavily on rough ground. He was in action instantly, rolling to the left until he hit the trunk of a tree. He got his feet under him, dodged around the tree and came to his feet.

He waited. There was utter silence. Even the leaves of the forest around him hung momentarily mute. What had happened to the second man? Skat cursed the darkness; cursed himself for getting into this spot. He bent down and rolled up his pant leg to where he had a small gun taped to his ankle. He had put it there before visiting Tate and had not been searched. He tore the gun loose and the butt felt solid and competent in his palm.

After another minute of waiting, he stepped around the tree—and all hell broke loose.

He heard his name called sharply just before a weight hit his shoulders from behind, bringing him down. He hurled it off and got to his knees. There was another struggle off in the darkness, muttered curses; then a smashing weight fell on Skat's head and he blacked out.

He came to, slowly realizing he was no longer in darkness. Faint light was pressing against his closed eyelids. His first reaction was one of sick despair. He'd failed. He'd goofed the whole thing but good. Whatever slim chance he'd had of thwarting these weird people was gone. They would kill him now; here possibly, or at the lake.

He opened his eyes to see a dark form holding a flash light. A voice asked, "You all right, Carmody?"

Skat was puzzled. There was no antagonism in the voice. On the contrary, it indicated concern. Skat turned his head. "I—"

"Sorry I slugged you, but I thought maybe there were two of them."

"Two?"

"Yes. After Herrin went down, I circled and got the hillbilly and when you moved I couldn't take any chances. As I said, I thought there might be two of them."

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Skat got to his feet. Both the turtle-neck boys were all right, though one of them was rubbing his jaw. The other shifted the direction of the flash to outline a body on the ground. Skat recognized it with a start.

The hillbilly, Dillard.

He realized in an instant what had happened—what it had to have been. Dillard had been skulking close by and the second young man had bumped into him and misinterpreted the whole action! They considered Dillard the attacker.

The one called Herrin held Skat's gun in his hand. "The hillbilly must have dropped this."

But he looked at Skat as he spoke. Was he suspicious? Skat couldn't be sure. Skat looked at the gun and said, "Evidently he did."

"We'll have to take him to the lake," Herrin said. "You help Martin carry him. I'll cover from behind in case there are any more of them around." As they started out, Herrin laughed. "It's nice to realize we don't have to be so devilish careful much longer."

Skat chilled at the words; at their sinister implication.

They moved on through the forest and came finally to the shore of Lake Duval. The moon was edging up over the trees and Skat could see the outline of a huge rock that was evidently used for a landmark. He put down his end of the hillbilly and asked, "What do we do now?"

"You follow us," Martin said.

"Where are you going?"

"Into the lake." Martin took Dillard's legs and followed Herrin, who was holding the unconscious man's shoulders, into the water. All three went instantly out of sight. But, before Skat could move, Herrin reappeared.

"Come on," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

"There's one little matter. I can't swim."

"You don't have to." Herrin reached up and took Skat by the wrist and jerked. Skat went headlong into the water; down into the cool blackness, into—what?

He had had no time to wonder before he was on the bottom. He'd lied to Herrin; he was an excellent swimmer and could handle himself under water. He opened his eyes and saw a line of soft luminescence appear on the bottom. Herrin pulled him toward it and he discovered it was not on the bottom, but against a low, underwater bluff. Now it was directly in

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front of him and as it widened, he could see Martin holding Dillard in his arms.

They all moved against the light together and Skat took a step forward and was no longer immersed. He stood in empty space with a wall of water—through which he had come — standing perpendicular behind him. He stared at it.

"Air pressure," Martin said. "It holds the water back until the lock closes."

As he spoke, Skat saw the two halves of the door move into place. As they did so, the thin wall of water that would be trapped inside, rushed to the ever-narrowing opening and back into the lake. To Skat, it was a weird phenomonon with all the markings of magic.

"The outside is perfectly camouflaged," Martin said. "Even if the lake was drained, the entrance would not be discovered."

"Has it ever been drained?"

"No. It's probably impossible. There are too many springs in the bottom."

"This is where Lorelie Gainer disappeared?"

Martin frowned. "A terrible laxness on the part of one of our people. She saw him dive into the lake and followed him. The door was already open, so there was nothing he could do but bring her inside."

"Is she still alive?"

"Yes. We haven't killed her yet. Only the man who brought her here was executed."

Martin and Herrin were stripping off their clothing. They slipped off their slacks and jackets. Then, with a concerted movement, peeled off their sweaters.

Skat gasped. They were both deformed—scarred.

On both sides of their necks, just under the lines of their jawbones, were peculiar gashes — apparently wounds that had not closed in healing, but had remained as open slashes bordered by scar tissue.

Herrin noted Skat's interest. "You are surprised? Don't be. We are an acquatic species. These openings are gills. Our bodies were put through a swift evolutionary correction, but the gills were left intact for use in the conquest of your planet. We are as much at home in the water as on land. More so in fact. After conquering your planet, vast dry areas will be immediately flooded."

Good God! Skat thought. *We're being taken over by*

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fish! He recovered his poise and said, "What are you going to do with the hillbilly?"

A sliding panel opened and three counterparts of Martin and Herrin appeared. They wore tight trunks and heelless rubber shoes. Martin answered Skat's question by indicating the prone body of Dillard who was just beginning to stir. "Throw him in with the girl."

The three picked Dillard up and moved back through the opening. Herrin motioned to Skat and they followed. Beyond the opening was a long hall walled by strange luminous metal. At the far end, they stopped and one of the men pressed the wall with his hand. A section slid downward, revealing a room, and Skat got a flash of a girl seated on a cot inside. She wore slacks and a turtle-neck sweater, but he wasn't fooled into thinking her a female of this terrible species. Her face matched that in the picture Saul Gainer had given him. She was Lorelie Gainer.

Skat's mouth curved slightly in grim humor. I've found her, he thought. But neither of us could ever make Gainer believe this. Not that we'll ever get a chance—

"In there," Herrin said, and the body of Dillard was dumped on the floor. The panel slid back into place. Herrin turned to Skat. "You'll need some dry clothes. That is, if you care to wear clothing."

Two hours later, Skat paced the floor of the small metal room to which he had been assigned. He wore slacks and a turtle-neck sweater, the evident symbols of this strange race, and his mind raced back over the highlights of what he had seen and what had been said by Martin on the inspection trip just finished. . . .

"We have instructions to keep you here until the leader comes. He will have made his decision by that time and you will either be executed or assigned to duties." Martin had spoken casually as though both possibilities were strictly routine.

They had walked through what appeared to be several miles of underground caverns. . . .

"The soil and rock that filled all this space was burned away through a process unknown to your science. A forceless molecular disintegration that leaves no residue."

Everything was of shining metal that gave off a glow. . . .

"This material would have

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been priceless to your civilization. The closest thing to it that you have is aluminum. To us, aluminum is practically an unrefined metal."

There were always two types of passages: dry corridors and glassed-in waterways running side by side. The waterways were by far the busiest, with a continual stream of these odd fish-human shooting back and forth with the ease and speed of racing eels. . . .

"We shall always remain more acquatic than otherwise. Therefore this planet will have to be made over for our convenience. We will need more water. The polar caps will be melted and no moisture will be allowed to remain in the static forms of ice or snow."

There was a bewildering wealth of efficient-looking, glittering machinery. It appeared to be divided into two sections. The heart of the first section was a huge circular room in the center of which stood a low-roofed, glass tank filling a space equivalent to several acres. The tank was full with crystal-clear water. On one side was a bank of instruments, levers, dials, and guages. There was room for a dozen attendants in front of the instrument bank. . . .

"This is the core of our attack strategy—the transmutation tank. It's exact counterpart is ready and waiting on our mother planet. At a given signal, both will begin to function as one— in such perfect integration that they are, in reality, one machine. When they are put into operation, they will begin transmuting a thousand men an hour. They will work day and night, sending us armed troops who will move out over this nation and over the world. Eventually, all our people—our whole civilization —will be moved from the old world to the new."

The second section was smaller and was made up completely of machinery. Its form gave Skat no clue to its function. . . .

"This is the power unit for our main attack facet. It is clear proof of our advanced science. It generates a power of gravity similar to that made manifest by planetary pull. It works in conjunction with a string of monitors built into the mechanisms of the radio stations we have placed near all coastal waters. At the right time, this unit will furnish the power of chaos—will throw the nation into helpless panic bordering on chaos."

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One small room near the entrance corridor was of special interest to Skat. . . .

"This is one of our arsenals from which our troops will be armed as they come from the transmutation tank. Each soldier will carry four weapons; this small tube which disintegrates to a fifty yard range; this handgun creates an instant vacuum over a large area. The air, rushing back into the vacuum causes the equivalent of a good-sized explosion killing everything in the area; this gun throws a paralyzing, but not lethal, ray; this is a plain, ordinary knife."

Skat had gotten in a few questions: "When do you plan to put all this into operation?"

"Soon, now. Very soon, as a matter of fact."

"Exactly what is this chaos you speak of?"

"If you are still alive at the time, you will see it on a vidar screen right here at Lake Duval. You will also hear your own radio commentators trying to calm the people."

"Is Bramwell Tate your leader?"

"Yes. He is a superman of our species. His life span is sixty years—four times that of the average."

"Is he crippled?"

"No. He uses that device to hide his gills."

"Why was Dillard, the hillbilly not killed when he shot one of your people?"

"We wanted no trouble of any kind. We wanted no one investigating in the area of the lake. Therefore, we removed the body and remained silent."

"There will be investigation of Lorelie Gainer's disappearance."

"That is why our schedule has been moved up—why we are striking soon."

Now, back in his room, Skat was trying to assimilate all he had seen and heard. It was enough to numb a man's mind; to drug his mental powers. Skat struggled against the opiate of sheer wonder. What was he going to do? How could he fight against this program of destruction of which the world was completely unaware?

He knew it was useless to try and leave the caverns. He was a prisoner. He considered this. Yes, a prisoner, but what restrictions would they place upon him? Was he, for instance, a prisoner in this room? It would be easy to find out.

Lorelie Gainer huddled miserably on one end of the cot

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while Dillard sat on the other rubbing his chin. Dillard said, "That feller had a punch like a mule's kick."

"Do you know why you were brought here?"

"Same reason as you were, I guess. I must have got in their way."

"What do you think they'll do with us."

"Don't know, but I'm sure goin' to make a complaint to the first state trooper I meet when I get out o' here."

"Do you think they'll let us out?"

"Can't say. Wish I had my rifle, though. I'd get out soon enough."

The panel that served as a door slid downward and Skat Carmody entered the room. The panel slid back into place. Dillard sprang up and moved forward with belligerance. "So you're one of 'em, eh, young feller? I should o' been suspicious when you came around with that there bottle o' whiskey!"

"Shut up and sit down," Skat said sharply. "I'm as much a prisoner here as you are—or almost as much." He turned his eyes on Lorelie Gainer. "Well, we meet at last."

"What do you mean?"

"My name is Carmody. Your father hired me to find you. I did it the hard way, but here I am."

"Is there any way to escape from this awful place?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't be allowed to leave, but I roamed around the place alone for a while before I came here and nobody objected."

"We could try to escape couldn't we?"

"I don't think we ought to risk it yet. If we fail I'd probably lose what liberty I have."

"But who are these people? What are they doing here?"

"It would take too long to explain. I'm going to leave now. I came here just to find out if they'd let me in. When the right time comes, I'll be back for you."

Skat tried to sound encouraging, but it was difficult. He turned toward the door. "You two just sit quiet and keep a stiff upper lip."

Dillard pulled at his beard. "You wouldn't happen to have another bottle o' that owl juice would you?"

"Sorry. Take care of Miss Gainer. Try to keep her spirits up."

Skat pushed the wall as he had seen Martin do it and the wall section lowered to let him out. He stood in the hall for a few minutes. Hatchet-faced young men in trunks and rubber shoes hurried past

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him in both directions. He was ignored completely and he sensed a new activity about him; an increased tempo that had come about in the few minutes he'd been in Lorelie Gainer's room.

Something had happened. Something important. Of this, he was sure. He began walking slowly down the corridor. No one stopped him. If he could get into the room housing the transmutation machine—

He walked in that direction but had not gone fifty feet when Martin came through a doorway into the corridor and saw him. There was a frown on Martin's face. He said, "Carmody! I've been looking for you. Why didn't you stay in the room I assigned you?"

Skat feigned innocence. "Just thought I'd look around on my own. Didn't know I was restricted."

"Word came from the leader. He's on his way up here and wants to see you when he gets here."

"What do you think that means?"

"I don't know, but it looks as though you're to be one of us."

"You seem pretty excited, my friend."

"I am! It's come, man! Schedule Two is in operation!"

"What does that mean?"

"You'll see. Go to your room. There's a vidar screen and a radio there. Wait until I call for you."

Martin hurried on down the corridor and Skat went back to his room. The radio was a small, conventional table model. The vidar screen much larger than he'd seen on commercial TV sets, and, aside from the screen, the unit was far less bulky.

The picture was remarkably clear. It was a shot of lower Manhattan Island with the Statue of Liberty in view. But it was the radio newscaster's excited voice that caught Skat's attention:

"—the tidal wave is now three miles from the eastern shore of Long Island, ladies and gentlemen. It arose from the sea about fifty miles offshore and began moving inland. It's height is now about fifteen feet, but it appears to be gathering height and speed as it moves. Efforts are being made to avert panic and achieve evacuation of the threatened areas, but the wave arose so suddenly and moved so fast that little is being accomplished. . . ."

Skat turned to the vidar screen. He could see the tidal

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wave now, moving in swiftly. He could see the panic in the streets; the jammed traffic; the terrorized people surging up the island.

Skat sat frozen, staring in dread fascination. The picture on the screen swung up the island, always in perfect focus, and from an angle that indicated some mechanical means of photography. There was about the picture, the essence of an all-seeing, impersonal eye.

Then Skat again became immersed in the horror of the changing scene. In what seemed no time at all, the tidal wave struck. Skat tensed himself and cringed back as the wall of water hit the vidar screen. He was sure it was far higher than the announcer had indicated. The water swept up and covered the low buildings in a frenzy of death-dealing destruction.

Suddenly there was lull in the tidal movement and the overhead eye of the vidar screen looked down momentarily upon an unmoving lake pierced by the towers of the taller buildings. Debris was rising to the surface to float placidly by. And, as is true also in a cyclone, this movement of water rather than air, had its oddities. Skat saw a huge six-wheel truck—evidently loaded with unsinkable material, pop to the surface, float past as though still traveling toward its destination. By some miracle of balance, a rowboat bearing a single man, the oars still in the locks, still in the man's grip, floated so near the Empire State Building that the man—paralyzed from terror — seemed to be peeking in the windows of the upper stories.

Now, after the still moment, the waters suddenly reversed and moved back as they had come. The water-line went down as swiftly as it had arisen and Skat could see debris tangled with the bodies of the dead as all was swept back out to sea. . . .

"Magnificent, isn't it?"

Skat whirled to find that Herrin had entered the room and was staring at the screen with shining eyes. Skat asked, "This is — your work?" He spoke through clenched teeth and his voice was choked.

But Herrin did not notice his high emotion; either that or he interpreted it as admiration for the scene. He said, "Our work. The harvest of years of work. That was only the first sweep. Even now, the waters are rising along the southern coast. Soon the Gulf waters will stir; then the

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Pacific will sweep in against the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Again and again these tidal waves will strike until even the Mississippi basin is a sea from the Great Lakes to the Gulf."

Skat turned slowly, trying to control himself. "Are the transmutation units working?"

"Even now," Herrin said. Soon they will be transmuting warriors from the mother planet at a speed that will insure victory. There will be no stopping us once that happens."

"Something's going to stop you!" Skat said, and dived at Herrin. The latter went down from a roundhouse right to the jaw. Instantly, Skat was upon him, venting a rage that swept over his sanity. He smashed again and again at the face in front of his fists until it turned to a bloody mask. Then he arose and picked up the radio and slammed it down and heard Herrin's skull crack. Breathing hard, he backed off and looked down at the dead man.

He wiped a hand across his streaming forehead and cursed himself. This venting of his fury had been amateurish. It had helped no one; had lessened any possibility of his fighting back against this terrible invasion.

One thing stood out clearly in Skat's mind. Now he must act; must continue to move until they killed him and he could move no longer. With a crafty grin, he drew a disintegration tube from the dead man's pocket.

He moved toward the door, knowing what he had to do—destroy the transmutation tank, and the unit sending out the magnetic power that was pulling the sea in over the land. Destroy both if possible; one if he was to die before completing the task.

This possibility made him wonder which unit was the most dangerous—if he could get to but one, which should it be? Then he remembered the transmutation tank was closest, so no decision was necessary. The tank would be first.

He reached for the door and as he did so, a dull, roar reached his ears, the walls of the room trembled slightly and his hopes soared. Maybe something had gone wrong! Perhaps a power pack somewhere had blown up. Certainly this project was powered by some sort of an atomic energy furnace.

He opened the door and

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stepped out into the corridor and his hopes sank. Everything was in order; business going on as usual; fish-men hurrying up and down the corridor with an ecstatic light in their eyes.

They paid no attention and for this he was grateful. That meant he would not have to blast his way to his objectives; not the whole distance, anyhow. With the disintegrator hidden in his pocket, he walked calmly down the corridor and the thought struck him that this was incredible—his walking unchallenged through the heart of the enemy's camp, bent upon destruction.

Then he realized how this could be; in all the years of brilliant planning, no allowance had been made for enemies inside the camp, because none had ever before penetrated the barrier. And with no automatic precautions in effect, the excitement of the moment covered him.

Elation swept him as he walked on and came within sight of the transmutation room. He entered it casually, forcing himself to remain calm. Already, naked fish-men were climbing out of the tank and Skat could see the forms—in various shadowy and gelatinous stages of transmutation, floating in the tank.

He circled slowly until the control panel was stretched out before him. An easy target. He was on the point of raising his gun.

Then, thinking swiftly, he changed his mind. He turned and gauged the distance to where the smaller magnetic unit would come into view. Not more than twenty steps. Strategy told him that should go first. The twenty steps seemed a mile as he paced them off slowly. At the end of his walk, a clear shot at the magnetic unit presented itself. Skat took a deep breath and looked in all directions. No one was paying any attention to him. They will soon, though, he thought grimly, and raised the gun. He pressed the button and a blue flame flashed from its barrel, spread out, and hit the magnetic unit. The attendants of the unit did not scream. There was no time. An instant of agony and they vanished into blue smoke along with the metal, plastic, and various compositions. There was a high whine of disintegration as all the affected matter was whipped into nothingness.

Swinging his ray gun from the great jagged hole it had

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left in the center of the unit, Skat swung it toward the transmutation control board. The scene of quick agony and destruction was repeated. The ray now hit the tank and one wall vanished. Tons of water poured forth; bodies in various stages of reassembly washed grotesquely across the room.

Skat turned and ran toward the corridor, dodging the sweep of the loosened water. But resistance had developed swiftly. Skat felt a sting on his left arm. He looked down and saw a small patch of flesh hanging in shreds. A near miss. He swept his gun backward, silencing the attack from that direction.

One thing worked in his favor. He was intermingled with those who attacked him and their weapons were not built to eliminate a single man among many. Their terrible guns were made to sweep hundreds down at a time. So, Skat finally faced the entrance to the corridor and two fish-men blocking the entrance with the only weapons which could be effective against him.

Knives.

He could not use his disintegrator or his escape path would be cut off. Water whirled about his ankles, further obstructing him. The two fish-men came in expertly, from two sides. One, in so doing, got out of line with the corridor entrance. Skat annihilated him with a short blast and turned to meet the other's charge. He caught the knife hand above the wrist, twisted it and heaved with his shoulder. The fish-man screamed as the bones snapped. The knife dropped. Skat scooped it up and drove it into the throat straining toward him. The fish-man gagged and went down.

Skat leaped into the corridor entrance, turned and sprayed his pursuers into oblivion. He ran on down the corridor and pressed the spot on the wall that should open the panel to Lorelie. He prayed that it would work. And it did.

He sent another ray at a few fish-men who had moved into the gaping hole he'd made, and yelled, "Come on! Both of you! We're getting out of here—maybe!"

Dillard came out, dragging Lorelie by the hand, and Skat covered their retreat to the escape lock. He wondered if they could open it. If not, he would have to blast it. Then, would the lake sweep in and drown them while they were

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trapped in the low-roofed pocket?

He backed through the inner door into the lock, slammed the door shut, and turned. All three of them stood staring. The outside door was open; smashed and twisted, it gave mute evidence of punishing explosion.

"It's wrecked" Lorelie exclaimed.

"Then why aint the lake flooding in?" Dillard wanted to know.

"Let's go out and find out," Skat said.

They walked through the broken entrance into darkness and stood knee-deep in water. Lorelie said, "It's nighttime. In there, you'd never know."

"And the lake's been drained!" Dillard said.

Skat felt a thrill of elation as he remembered the explosion he had felt in the cavern. This meant but one thing; Saul Gainer had reconsidered. Then he'd acted and the government had gone into action instantly.

There was a roar from overhead. "Jets!" Skat yelled. "Let's get out of here!" They sloshed through the water and clambered up on the shore as a deeper sound came to Skat's ear. "Bombers! We're cooked!"

"No we aint!" Dillard shouted. "Follow me. I know some caves myself!" He hauled them swiftly over boulders and through brush and pushed them, finally down into a musty smelling place covered over with a great thickness of blessed boulders.

Just as the air thundered and the ground rocked and the bombers came in.

Skat lay back with Lorelie in his arms and felt both the warmth of accomplishment and her body. "They'll smash hell out of things, but I don't think they'd have gotten them without us," he said. "They'd have pulled sea water over this whole area before bombs could have gotten through to them."

"I suppose the troops will move in after the bombing," Lorelie said.

"You said it. They come out of that hole now like rats from their burrows and the Marines will be here to meet them."

"I wonder if any Americans were killed."

Skat sobered. Lorelie didn't know about the tidal wave. And he didn't feel like telling her. Were her father and mother safe? Time would tell.

THE END

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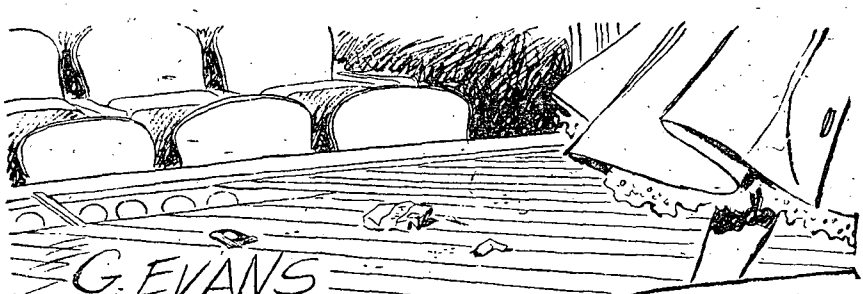
The TYPEWRITER

By J. J. ALLERTON

All he did was go out to buy a second-hand typewriter. Seems a play was in rehearsal and they had to have the thing as a sort of prop. There was one drawback, however: the girl who originally owned the machine had to have it back in a hurry—or go stark raving mad.

CARNEY HOLT believed a woman could be pretty, have a nice body, dress well, and still be an efficient office worker. Sherry Biddle had all the qualifications, and one other. She had the "know-what" that Holt demanded of his employees. Sherry knew what Holt-Hodges Television Productions wanted. That was why she did all the reading of agents' submissions.

We were in her office talking about the production of *The Typewriter*. She was behind her desk leafing through the pages of a script. I had my back to her but I could hear the rustle of the turn-



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"Break it!" I shouted. "It's your only hope!"

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ing pages. My attention was on the only decoration in the office, an "abstract" painting, a thing of lines and ellipses and circles dark against a background of pale blue and soft yellow and angry red.

"Everybody wants in on it, Ad," she said to me. "It'd be a shame if you can't direct it. And you can, you know; Mr. Holt likes you."

I turned away from the picture to face Sherry. "Sure he likes me," I said. "But this is going to be in color. And on a fifty-thousand-dollar budget, and with name stars. First thing I learned in this racket, Sherry, is not to kid yourself. Holt isn't going to take chances."

"With you?" she said. "He let you direct the last four *Havoc* shows and everyone was happy with them."

"But never an H-H Stagecoach," I reminded her. "And this one is going to be drama with a capital D." She had turned away from the script and was running her fingers up and down the leather part of the photo folder which held her husband's likeness. They had pooled their savings and opened a book-and-art shop in the Village. "How's Tom doing?" I asked.

She was in another world immediately, the other world that mattered. "Oh, those crazy mixed-up kids! They drive Tom *frantic!* You know how old-hat he is about books. Well, they stand around and gab Sartre and Kierkegaard and other-consciousness in science-fiction; and poor Tom, he just nods and smiles and feels sorry for them and slips them hamburger money so they can go to Mother Hubbard's. Honestly! Those kids live on the edge of nothing, most of them."

"The top of the world can be that place, too," I said.

She started to say something but it was left unsaid. The phone rang. She lifted the receiver and I could hear the crisp crackle of Holt's voice. She jerked her face at me, her eyes telling me the call was about me. "Yes, he's here. Will do. Right. . . . Mr. Holt would like to see Mr. Adams in Mr. Holt's office," she said after hanging up the receiver.

I winked, went to the door. She caught me with my hand on the knob.

"*I* think you can do a good job on the *Typewriter* script," she said.

There were some who didn't like Carney Holt. They said he was too hard, too rough, too ready to step on anyone

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who disagreed with him. What they forgot was that Holt could and did respect anyone who did a workmanlike job. When you worked for him you gave him every bit of honest effort you were capable of, or else. . . .

And he knew, fully and exactly, what he wanted.

The inevitable cigar was in the corner of the puffy lips. He looked at me over the wide black rims of his glasses, pushed them up and said: "I'm putting you on the *Typewriter* thing . . . Assistant Director. It'll be a good credit for you." He must have seen something in my face I hadn't been able to stop from showing. "Not on this, Ad. Maybe on another Stagecoach, but not this one."

"A prop man under Henderson," I said. The bitterness was rank on my lips.

He lit the cigar, watched the bluish smoke feather upward in whirling spirals. His eyes when they met mine again were kindly. "I didn't tell you," he said, "but Bill Hodges called me from Hollywood after that last *Havoc* show you did. Said it was a darn good piece of direction. Nice mood you got into it. I agreed with him, and more. So that's why I'm telling you this. I don't like Henderson, either. But he's worked with Lynn Bagley on the stage and in pictures. He knows how to handle her."

I couldn't stop myself. "The whole setup is wrong! They think the story's about the suffragette movement. The hell with that! It's a simple story about a woman who knows what she wants and a man who doesn't, and how in the end they are both brought to the realization what they both want is the same thing. The typewriter is a symbol, used as a catalyst. . . . Don't you remember the reading Bagley gave? She was an early Twentieth Century Joan of Arc. And Henderson telling her how truly 'superb' she was."

He turned his face away from me, blew smoke at the ceiling. "You know, Ad," he said, still without looking at me, "this air-conditioning cost me a fortune. I think of that every time I get hot under the collar and it's wonderful how fast I cool off at the thought. What you need is an air-conditioner, too. But I didn't ask you in to discuss the play. We've run into a prop difficulty. Typewriters—two of them. Vintage, early Nineteen Hundred. Find them, Ad. The cashier'll give you two hundred bucks just

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in case someone wants to hold you up on the price."

"Yeah," I said. "I get it. Prop man under Henderson."

Bill Gorman was doing the adaptation for Holt. He and I shared an office. He was a big good-natured Irishman whose face was always between a laugh and a snarl. He loved writing and what he wrote showed that love. He had his back to me when I opened the door, his right hand raised high in getting it into the sleeve of his jacket. "Be finished with it by evening," he said, turning. "H'mm! Want to tell poppa. . . . ?"

I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything. I just wanted to be left alone for a little while. If I was left alone and not have to talk about it I would not have to think about it. I could think of typewriters or the heat of Madison Avenue or anything; just so it would not be. . . .

"You've got to learn, Ad. You've got to learn. If you can't beat 'em, join them. But always keep one part of yourself out of their reach."

I nodded. He patted my shoulder as he stepped past me. Somehow I felt better because of it. I sat down and began thinking of typewriters. As I remembered, the play mentioned a Remington Rand. I wasn't sure. It would have been a hell of a note to run in an anachronism. I called Remington Rand to make sure. I spoke to a Mrs. Johnson.

". . . The Number 10 was the first model that looked like a typewriter of the present," she said. "It came out in Nineteen-Eight. Matter of fact I saw one in a plumbing shop on Third Avenue the other day. You shouldn't have difficulty getting one."

Well, Nineteen-Eight was as good a year as any, I thought as I slipped into the jacket of my cord suit.

This was the fourth day of above ninety-degree heat. The air was close, hot, physical. People's faces were sullen or peevish. I hailed a cab to the curb, told the driver to go to lower Broadway, to Eighth Street.

That area close to the Village is a beehive of small shops. I remembered a couple of places dealing in used typewriters. I found a machine I wanted in a place on Fourth Avenue just off Eighth Street. I told the man to have it sent to the H&H offices, after I paid him for it. His asking price had been thirty-five dol-

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lars, and I didn't bat an eye about it. I continued down Fourth and by the time I got to Sixth Street the perspiration was streaming from me. I was ready to call it quits when I passed a small pawnshop. I stopped, glad to get in under the shade of the faded awning, not really caring about the things in the window.

They were mostly tools, cheap watches and rings, box and folding cameras, and hanging by strings from the ceiling were guitars and ukes and a couple of dusty fiddles. But in the rear of the window were a few portable typewriters, all of them quite old.

The door was open and it was almost as hot inside as it was out. I was the only customer. The fixtures were few, simple and old, and the three naked bulbs hanging from long black wires spaced a few feet apart furnished the only light. There was a barred glass cage at the rear of the store and to its right a narrow swinging door marked Private. A man came through the door and into the pale light of the bulbs.

He was thin and stooped. He wore steel-rimmed glasses set low on the bridge of a thin-fleshed nose which seemed to have lost its cartilage. His face, narrow and small-boned, had a shiny scrubbed look. For an instant I envied him his age. The old don't perspire so quickly or heavily as the young.

"Pretty darned hot out, heh?" he said. His smile showed teeth too perfect to be his own. "What can I do for you?"

I said: "I'm looking for a typewriter, an old-style standard model."

"Big one, eh? Well, I've got a couple. . . ." His eyes were suddenly narrowed behind the glasses, and tiny patches of wrinkles showed at the corners of his tightly-pressed lips. "Say! I think I got just the machine for you."

He led the way to the glass showcase at the rear.

There were three machines on the case. Two my eyes passed over quickly but the third was just what the doctor had ordered. It was a Number 10 Remington, a clean-looking job, and when I tapped a couple of keys the action was good. Someone had taken care of it.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Just what I'm looking for. How much?"

"Two dollars."

"*What!* Are you kidding . . .?"

"Look, mister!" he said

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sharply. "I didn't ask you in here. You want the machine. . . . Only thing is we don't deliver. You'll have to take it out of here."

"I'd be crazy if I didn't," I said. I didn't understand why the price was what he asked, nor did I care. That was his affair. I thought, better pay him before he changes his mind. "I'll want a receipt."

"Sure thing," he said. He went back to the office, returned with a narrow receipt book. He wrote my name and address out, filled in the amount of the sale, marked it paid and tore out the original and gave it to me. "Thanks," he said.

I said: "This thing isn't—hot . . .?"

"You got a receipt," he replied.

It was too warm to argue, and besides what was there to argue about? It was his merchandise and if he wanted to give it away that was his business. I leaned forward, took a grip on the cool metal of the typewriter base, and fell back with a startled yelp. My fingers tingled as though they had received an electrical charge. I whipped around to face him again.

He wasn't frightened. That wasn't what I saw in his eyes. They were focused on the machine. I could have sworn his lips moved as though he was talking to it. "What is this, a rib!" I yelled. "You got that thing wired?"

His voice was tired. "No. No. Maybe—uh . . ." He lifted a hand to his eyebrows, wiped them of perspiration then rubbed the hand clean on his trousers. "Go ahead. Take it."

This time the typewriter came free without shocking me.

"Old fool," I muttered as I lugged it out into the heat of the street.

I decided against going back to the office even though it meant I would have to carry the machine once more. All I wanted was to get back to the one-and-a-half room apartment I had in the Beaux Arts. There were ice cubes in the refrigerator and an almost full bottle of Vodka. More than anything else I wanted the feel of water against my flesh; I felt the grime and dirt and sweat as though they were another skin.

It was worth the half-dollar I gave one of the bellmen, just so I wouldn't have to lug the machine into the hotel.

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Three Vodka Collins and a shower later I was stretched naked on the bed letting whatever breeze managed to get through the window dry me off. Presently I drowsed off, to be jarred awake by the telephone's ringing. I mumbled something and the desk asked if it was all right to, "Send the young lady up?"

I didn't know what they were talking about but I said yes. I hastily got into slacks and a tee shirt. Just in time to answer the discreet knock at the door.

She was almost as tall as I, not pretty; the line of her jaw and chin too strong, the mouth too small, her face too long. Her eyes were level and calm, a dark blue.

She was a complete stranger.

"Mr. Adams. . .?"

"In the flesh," I said.

"May I come in?"

I nodded and stepped aside. Her white blouse rustled crisply as she passed me. She wore a dark skirt, cotton or linen from the way it swished, and open-toed white wedgies. I waved her to the club chair but she went to the desk on which I had placed the typewriter.

"My uncle made a mistake when he sold you this typewriter," she said.

"Mistakes like that on everything he sells and he's out of business in a short time," I said lightly.

"You shouldn't have taken advantage of him!" she said, not smiling.

The tone of her voice made me angry. "Oh, let's not have any of that. He didn't sound senile to me. Matter of fact he did everything but push the machine at me."

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I imagine he did." Her voice had a break in it, and she lowered her head while she was talking so I couldn't see her eyes. Her head lifted. Her eyes were darker than before, angry. "Two dollars! I would have been ashamed."

I said: "Yeah—you would have. . . ."

There was a short silence while she chewed her upper lip. I studied her, noticed things which had escaped me before. Her mouth was small, like a child's, soft and curling at the corners. Her hands were nice, fingers long, nails well-shaped. I liked the light brown hair, too. It curled close to her head, fitting it like a helmet. There was one curl that didn't want to stay close.

I wanted to put my finger against it. . . .

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She broke the silence. "I'll buy it back from you."

"For two dollars, I suppose," I said.

"No, you're not the sort makes that kind of mistake. I'll give you—"

I had stopped being angry. But she didn't know when to stop needling. Or didn't care. She wasn't the kind to be coy or kittenish. If she could dish it then she'd better be able to take it. "You'll give me nothing!" I said. "I've got a receipt says it's mine, all paid for, very good in any court. So the machine stays here, right here!"

Once more there was a silence. Her fingers toyed with a flat purse which she held against her body. I knew I was acting like an idiot. But every time she opened her mouth the wrong words came out. Nor was I any better.

Suddenly she had the purse open. I could see her pulling paper bills from it. She turned, placed the money on the desk, lifted the typewriter, and started for the door. Her eyes were tear-bright. "I don't care—he shouldn't have done it—there's more than enough. . . ."

I stopped her. We stood face to face, the typewriter between us. She said. "Please! There's fifty dollars on the desk. That should be enough."

I gave her my best director's smile, the kind I used when somebody got temperamental on me. "It's yours," I said. "And you don't have to pay me anything. Besides, you don't want to leave like this. Your nose is shiny, you're two seconds away from tears, and this machine is too heavy for you to carry. What's more—"

I made a face at which her eyes went wide.

"—you're standing on my foot."

She looked down to where one wedgie almost covered one of my bare feet, and burst into laughter.

I took the machine from her, placed it back on the desk. There were five ten-dollar bills on the glass top. When I turned she was in the club chair, her face turned aside from me. I said: "I think we can both use a drink." I dropped the ten-dollar bills in her lap on my way to the refrigerator. "Vodka, Scotch, rye . . . ?"

She shook her head, not lifting it. "Anything."

I made a couple of Vodka Collins, and took my time about it. She had regained her composure by the time I brought the drinks over. The

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money was still in her lap. I dragged a small table over, set it beside her chair, and the drinks on the table. Then I got the chair by the telephone and brought it to face her, and straddled it.

"What's the mystery?" I asked. "And don't say there isn't any. Your uncle knew the machine was yours. Even if he didn't want you to have it he still could have gotten more than two dollars for it. I think if I'd have said too much he'd have given it to me for a dollar. Don't blame me for being curious, do you?"

"No. I don't blame you for anything. You didn't know. You're being very considerate right now. And I don't deserve it; I acted like crazy, didn't I?"

I took a long slow pull at my drink. She sipped hers. After a moment she smiled. It changed her face, softened it, made me hold my breath hoping she wouldn't stop.

"I think I'd better go," she said. "I left Uncle watching the first game of a doubleheader. He's a Giant fan. But he *will* worry about me."

I looked to see what time it was, remembered I had left my strap watch on the dresser, and got up to get it.

"It's nine-thirty," she said. "You don't have to bother."

I continued to the dresser, strapped on the watch, and pulled a pair of sox from one of the drawers. I slipped them on and a pair of moccasins over them, and went to the desk for the typewriter. "No bother," I said, reaching for the machine.

She beat me to it. Her knuckles were white with strain as she pulled it toward her. We were side by side. I could feel the tension in her. "It's all right," she said. "I'll carry it."

I took hold of her shoulders and tried to turn her, but it was as if her fingers were glued to the machine.

"Please. Let me carry it?" she begged.

"Damn it!" I said in exasperation. "I'll look like a fool, you carrying this thing and me walking beside you through the lobby. I'll let you hold it on your lap all the way home," I promised. "But I'll carry it out of here."

Once more I felt a shock when I touched the machine. But this time I didn't jerk away, nor did I make a sound. I carried the machine out and all the way to the street. She got into the cab I whistled over, and I placed the machine on her lap. "You know," I said as I crouched before her, "I

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don't know your name. Mine's Wilson Adams, Ad to my friends."

She waited till I backed out. "I'm Jan Neville," she said.

I jerked my head at her. "Look, Jan. There's a nice place in the Village where the food is good and the paintings not too arty. Like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"I'll be ready at six-thirty," she said promptly. "I live with my uncle. The flat's right over the shop."

I went back to my apartment thinking I might have time to go to a late movie. Instead I decided on another shower and a good night's sleep, for a change. I was asleep seconds after I turned out the light. . . .

I opened my eyes to utter and complete blackness. Suddenly there was a clatter of drapery hooks sliding on a rod and the dark curtain before me parted. I was at one end of a long and narrow hall. Far ahead was a pale and shimmering light. I could not see what was beyond the light. As I started to walk toward it the clatter of a typewriter's keys sounded to my left. Presently another, louder one, joined in to my right. And another to my left, and another — right, left, each louder than the others, until I was running toward the light.

And I was into and out of the area of light. Silence! Before me was a barred cage. A man's face showed behind the bars. He was old, his small-boned face narrow and shiny-looking. A pair of steel rimmed glasses rested on a thin nose that looked like it had lost its cartilage. He thrust out a hand at me.

"That will be two dollars— Just two dollars—Only two dollars," he said.

There was a swinging door marked Private to the right of the barred cage. I went through it. The old man was rocking slowly before a television screen that was dark. The room was cluttered with junk, but a pair of shiny brass andirons stood against the wall to my left.

The old man turned to me and gave me a toothless grin. "Williams is up," he said, "and Dark's up and Mays is up and Irvin's up and Mueller's up and Thompson's up and the Giants win. . . ."

I turned away from him and saw her. She was standing in a corner. Her curly, light-brown hair fit her head like a helmet. She turned dark frightened eyes to me. "Please give me the typewriter," she

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said. She began to run from one side of the room to the other. And as she ran she became smaller and smaller, and her voice fainter and fainter, until at the end I could barely hear the words. "The typewriter — the typewriter — typewriter—writer. . . ." She was gone.

Silence!

And once more the clatter of typewriter keys. I saw it on a desk before me. It was bathed in a glow of light. Although I could hear and see the typewriter keys move they moved without the aid of human hands. Suddenly I was possessed by a sullen savage hatred for the machine. I reached for one of the brass andirons, lifted it over my head.

... "Two dollars—Just two dollars—Only two dollars. . . ."

"Please give me the typewriter."

"No!" I shouted, and brought the andiron down, too late to stop its swing. Jan lay across the typewriter, her arms embracing it, her eyes on mine, imploring. . . .

Her scream rang in my ears.

"JAN!" I shouted.

The faint echoes of my yell scurried around the room and vanished before full wakefulness returned to me. I was leaning forward in bed, supported by my hands behind me. A damp night wind fanned my naked chest. Sounds came through the darkness; a fog horn out on the river, the blast of an auto horn, the drone of a plane, louder overhead and fading into silence after a moment.

I went back to sleep. To a dreamless sleep, this time. . . .

I was a little late getting to work, but no one seemed to notice. Bill Gorman had finished the adaptation and Holt had a full set of mimeos run off for the cast. Holt had also scheduled a rehearsal for the afternoon.

The morning passed quickly and peacefully enough, but the rehearsal brought fireworks. Henderson and Bagley got into a hassel that worked on everyone's nerves. They screamed at each other like a couple of crazy women, and by the time they were through, so was everyone else. I couldn't blame the rest of the cast. Henderson's falsetto shrieking was enough to get through the hide of a rhino.

I left early.

It was too early to pick Jan up so I decided to try getting another Remington. Luck wasn't with me. I saw a couple of machines but they

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were such beat-up jobs Holt would have refused them. Jan's machine was just what we needed. The thought of her machine brought the nightmare back to me. I puzzled over it, couldn't understand what had brought it on. Unless. . . . I pushed the thought away. It was too fantastic to think the machine had the power to cast a spell, was the only phrase I could think of.

I got to the pawnshop a half hour early.

Jan's uncle came forward to meet me. He held out a couple of dollar bills. "Your two dollars, son," he said, his face expressionless.

I took the receipt from my billfold and gave it back to him. "I'd like to ask you—" I began.

"Any talking Jan'll do it," he said. He turned away from me and walked to a side door. "Jan, a young man to see you," he yelled.

Presently she appeared. She wore a blue dress with a white collar, simple, cool, and dressy enough. The open-toed wedgies again completed her costume. Her hair shone like burnished copper. She came forward, shook my hand gravely, and said: "You're a little early."

I didn't want to let go of her hand. "Thought you might be hungry," I said.

She said: "I—I'm sorry, Ad, but I don't think I can go. I have some writing to do that I must finish. Thanks so much for the invitation."

If she had any idea I was going to leave I disillusioned her quickly. "I didn't know you write. Used to do some myself, before I went to work for Holt and Hodges Productions. We do the H-H Stagecoach TV show and *Havoc*. Ever see them?"

She was looking at me with that oddly intent expression I had noticed before. She shook her head.

I continued: "I direct *Havoc*. Hey! Maybe I can use some of your material. Mind my looking at it?"

She shook her head in denial again.

I said: "Look, it's only dinner. I'll make it the Burgerbowl so it'll be closer and you can get back earlier, if you like. You know, even writers have to eat."

She smiled suddenly. I felt warmth at the pit of my stomach and thought: Oh Lord! This can't be it! You're not what I thought you'd be when I'd find you. You're not even pretty, nor do you have what I thought had to be there, the sharpness, the

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glamor, the hep act, the phoniness. You're just beautiful, and real.

"Maybe you *do* have an idea," she said. "I'll take you up on the Burgerbowl thing."

Somehow she managed to get me talking about myself while we were having coffee. I tried to pass my accomplishments off lightly, but before I knew it I was telling her all about *The Typewriter* and how much I would like to direct it. "But the old man won't let me," I said sadly. "I'm okay for *Havoc*. That's suspense; anyone can do it."

"What is it," she asked, "suspense between a couple of rabbits?"

I laughed. "That wouldn't be suspense. We all know what happens then."

She echoed my laughter, but turned quickly serious again. "Please don't run yourself down. Everything dramatic has suspense in it. Two people talking on a corner doesn't mean anything unless you listen in and find out they're going to commit a crime, or save a life, or maybe they're in love and can't get married. Then you're going to want to follow them, and every step of the way can be filled with suspense. I think you can direct *The Typewriter*—I ought to know.

"I wrote it."

"Jan Neville — Ann Norton?" I whispered. A sudden thought hit me with pile driver force. This girl would make a terrific Belinda, the heroine of her own story. And I knew how to do it with her. She was a natural for it. I came out with my idea in a rush of words.

"No."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm not an actress."

"And that's why I think you'll project. I know what I'm talking about."

"I'm sorry, Ad. It won't work. Besides, I've got to be at the typewriter."

I was angry again. "What is it with this typewriter of yours? Every time I touched it I got a shock. Your uncle is scared of it, and I know you are. You're afraid to let it out of your sight."

"Afraid?" She laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "We've done everything to get rid of it. That's why my uncle tried to sell it to you. But we can't. And——" Suddenly her hand was at her mouth, as if she was suddenly aware of the revealing words she had been saying.

"Tell me all about it, Jan," I said gently. "Get it out of your system."

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"Maybe," she hesitated, "maybe it *will* do me good. My mother was a helpless cripple for a large part of her life. She had a will of iron and a relish for living, but she was tied to a bed. She got the idea she wanted to write, even though it was a physical impossibility for her. My father bought her a typewriter, the same one you tried to buy, and she made him put it on a table that stood beside her bed. She must have written a hundred stories with her eyes before she died.

"One time they took it away for some reason. She screamed until they brought it back. The day she died she asked me to sit beside her. I was fifteen at the time. I remember how her eyes blazed. She told me never to get rid of the typewriter, that she was in it, all her desires and wants, all the things she couldn't do. I promised. She died that night.

"Two years later my father died, and I was alone. So was my uncle. He took me in and we've been together ever since."

"But — the typewriter? What about it?" I asked.

"Once my uncle was selling it to a man. I was upstairs. I came running down, screaming for him not to. I don't know how I knew it was being offered for sale. Another time we got desperate and carried it down to an empty lot. I put it on the ground, but my fingers wouldn't let go of it. The typewriter seemed to have a life of its own, a force that held onto me."

"That's crazy!"

She said: "Yes, isn't it? Do you know where I was yesterday afternoon when you were buying it? On Long Island visiting a friend. Suddenly my heart was gripped with a band of ice. I knew it had to do with the typewriter. I came back like one in a panic. No, Ad, we've tried everything. All I know is that I've got to keep working it. I've written dozens of stories and sold them. But I give the money away. I feel dirty keeping it."

"Let's go back to your place," I said. "I'd like to look at it again."

She agreed after a short argument.

The store was dark but she gave me her hand, and I followed her through the swinging door. She flicked a light switch and an overhead fixture blossomed whitely. She went straight to a desk at the far end of the room. The typewriter was on the desk. She

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shivered suddenly as if with cold. I looked around. There weren't any andirons, as in the dream, but there was a steel poker leaning against the old-fashioned wall safe which covered almost all of the wall to my left. I reached over, took hold of the poker.

"Will you move over a bit," I said casually. "We'll take care of this thing, right now."

I lifted the poker on high, started to bring it down on the machine, and she stepped in front of it, body hunched forward, as if in protection. Somehow my reflexes worked. The poker missed her head by a fraction of an inch. It put a half-inch dent in the desk.

I dropped the poker, and took hold of her. I held her close, stroking her head, murmuring brokenly: "Jan. I could have killed you. Why did you do that? Honey, honey, what's wrong?"

After a moment she leaned back in my arms. "I don't know why, Ad. Something pulled me to it. It's the typewriter. I know it."

"No! No, I won't let it," I said. We looked at each other in silence for a few seconds. Then I kissed her. She answered the pressure, hungrily, ardently.

"I—I think I've fallen in love with you, Ad," she whispered.

"And I with you. Just like that. Honey, I've got to think this out. I'll call you tomorrow. About two o'clock."

She nodded. I kissed her again, and left.

It must have been four in the morning when the solution popped into my head. I was smiling when I fell asleep.

And this time I didn't dream.

She was waiting for my call. I told her to meet me at H&H, to be there before three. I didn't tell her there was to be another rehearsal at three. The moment I hung up I turned to Bill Gorman, who was clearing his desk.

"Do me a favor, Bill?"

"Sure thing."

"This girl I just talked to. Her name is Jan Neville. Writes under the name of Ann Norton."

"The *Typewriter* thing?

"Yeah. She's in trouble. I can't explain now, Bill. I won't be here when she gets here. Will you keep her here till I get back?"

He nodded in agreement.

I left, got a cab, and told the driver to take me to a spot a half block from the pawnshop. I waited out of sight,

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but where I could watch the store. After a half hour Jan left. She walked away from me toward a subway entrance on Fourth.

The instant she was out of sight I hot-footed it for the store.

I didn't waste any time with her uncle. "Jan told me all about the typewriter," I said. "I know how I can help here. . . ."

"Hey!" he broke in. "She just went to meet you."

"I know," I said. "I've been waiting for her to leave. Let me take the typewriter. Before this afternoon's over Jan won't have it to worry about."

He hesitated, then suddenly said: "Take it, boy. I hope for her sake, you're right."

"I know I'm right," I said.

He walked back to the office with me. He made it obvious he wasn't going to touch it. My body felt like a hundred volts went through it when I put hands on it. I stifled a cry of pain and held on. Presently the numbness wore off, as if it knew I was stronger. I lifted the machine and carried it outside where Jan's uncle hailed a cab for me.

I lugged it directly into the rehearsal hall. They had put a couple of tables up to represent desks. The typewriter I had bought for thirty-five dollars was on one table, and on the other someone had put a small wooden box to represent a second typewriter. I placed the machine I was carrying in a corner where it wouldn't be noticed too quickly. Then I went downstairs to where Jan would be waiting.

She greeted me with one of her rare smiles. "I like Bill," she said. "He paid me some very nice compliments."

"So they all will," I said, "when I introduce you as the author of *The Typewriter*."

Lynn Bagley was gracious as only a Hollywood star can be, Henderson showed her all of his teeth and said he was delighted, Holt wanted to know whether she had more scripts to offer, and the rest of the cast was pleasant to her. I could see she was getting a thrill out of it. It was probably her first taste of the theatre.

Then Henderson called the rehearsal.

I sat her beside me, but where she couldn't possibly see the typewriter. I talked to her in a low voice as the cast took their places. "This is going to be the climax of the play," I said. "Bob Renny, that big guy there, plays James, the hero. Henderson

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wants to get this scene perfect. All right, here comes Belinda. . . ."

Lynn Bagley came center stage, did a bit of stage business with her hands, and went behind the table on which stood the wooden box. At a nod from Henderson Renny came center, standing close beside the table where the real typewriter stood. He looked down at the machine.

Jan was watching, wide-eyed.

Henderson said: "All right. This is the punch scene. Lots of socko in it, Bob. Don't forget, you *hate* the typewriter."

Renny nodded, and went into his lines: "This is the thing between us, this machine. You've made a God out of it. You worship it, and it's destroying you. Well, I won't let it! I won't let it because actually it's destroying both of us!" He put his hands apart and brought them down as if taking hold of the machine. Then he brought his hands up and down in a swift gesture.

"Great!" Henderson shrilled. "Great! Wasn't it, Mr. Holt?"

I said, "Nuts! It stinks."

There was a long moment of silence. I heard Jan gasp. I went on: "You missed the boat. James shouldn't be the one to break the machine. Belinda should, she created the monster."

The silence thickened. But I could see Holt's thoughtful look. I got up, went to the corner and brought the machine I had placed there, to the table. I swept the wooden box from it and put the typewriter in its place. I turned to Lynn, who was staring open-mouthed at me. "You. . . . I pointed a finger at her. "Find a chair. Jan, get up here."

Jan walked like a sleepwalker, her eyes held to the typewriter.

I turned her to face me. "You know those lines better than any of us. You lived with them, sweated with them, brought them from your heart and soul. All you have to do is James' speech but transpose all 'you's' to 'I's.' Understand?"

I don't know whether she did or not. I voiced a silent prayer and went back to stand before my chair. "All right, Jan," I said. "It's all yours."

She wasn't looking at Renny. She looked straight at me. But the words were Belinda's; she *was* Belinda, until she had to take hold of the machine. She couldn't.

My voice was calm, low,

(Concluded on page 130)

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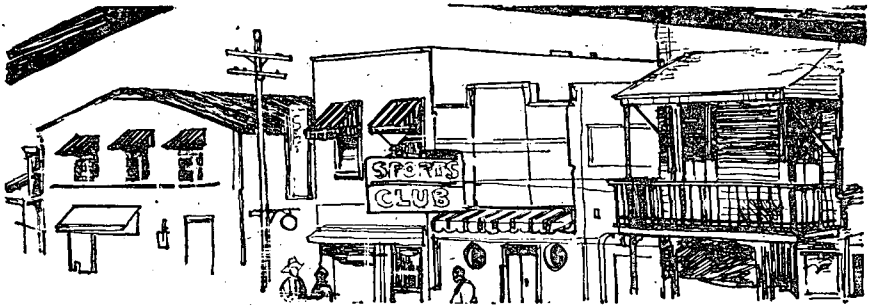

TOO TOUGH TO BURY

By RON BUTLER

You've got to honor a man's last wishes—even if he's a pure-bred Martian, with the eye-stalks to prove it. So when the late Captain Loder of Mars asked to be interred on Earth, his buddies tried to arrange an American-type funeral. Better they should have stood on Mars!

WE RATHER expected something would go wrong during the last minute preparations for departure. You don't visit the third planet from the sun every day, and returning to Mars can be just like catching the express monorail from Syrtis to Polar South City. It's something about the orbits being right. I wouldn't know, because I'm the expedition sociologist.

Anyhow, three of us were playing *wust* in the main lounge when the first mate came running in. Tears were brimming from his eyestalks as he said, "The Captain is dead."

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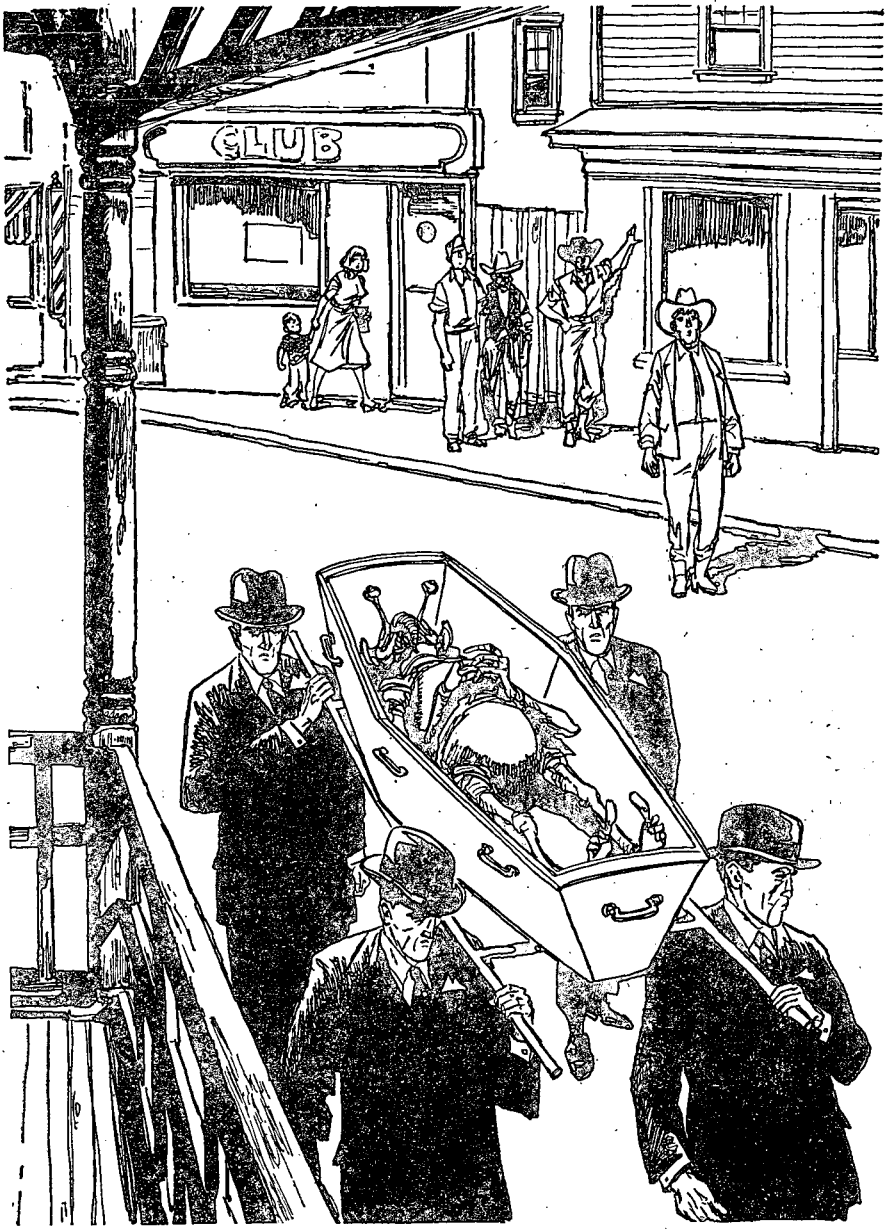

Four gangsters for pall-bearers—and an alien as the corpse!

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"Dead?" I repeated, stunned.

"He fell from the launching scaffold."

Forgetting our game of *wust*, we all crawled to the floorport and looked down. Sure enough, we could see Captain Loder's crumpled body a hundred feet below us on the sand. Three or four crewmen were scurrying about him, waving their eyestalks in despair.

"The Captain learned to love this planet," said the first mate. "His last wish would have been to be buried just like one of the natives."

We all agreed tearfully.

"That's where you come in, Luj," said the first mate.

"Me?" I demanded. That's my name—Luj.

"You're our sociologist. You're supposed to understand the mores and traditions of Earth. We want you to see that the Captain has a fitting Earth-style burial."

"But I didn't get a chance to study their funeral customs," I protested.

"Isn't it just a matter of digging a hole and—" began the cabin boy lamely. Angry eyestalks stared him down.

"On Mars," said the first mate loftily, "our dead are *flamengated* before cremation. On Earth, certain procedures are undoubtedly followed before entombment. We want everything just right."

I waved my eyestalks. "I'm sorry," I said. "I haven't studied the death rites here."

"Then we'll cancel blastoff, Luj. It's difficult, but we can do it. Finding the proper procedure will be your problem. Please make sure everything is just right."

So, while the whole crew got into its mourning clothes, I went to the deepfreeze, cold-stored my regular Martian form, thawed out my synthetic Earth body, climbed into it and took off for the nearest Earth city, which happened to be Las Vegas.

Given: one Martian corpse.

To find: Proper burial procedure, Earth standards.

Process: Go to the nearest center of habitation and inquire.

Solution: Elementary.

Or so I thought.

When I reached Las Vegas, night had already settled over the desert. They had quite an oasis there. Las Vegas, I mean. We use krypton and xenon for the same purpose they use neon, by the way, but their colors are brighter.

I thought I'd look for a policeman and get things straightened out at once. I

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was in a hurry because wearing a synthetic body can be uncomfortable, something like wearing what they call contact lenses, but you feel the discomfort not just on your eyestalks but all over your body.

There seemed to be a policeman in front of a place called the *Golden Checkbook.* Music drifted out, people staggered out. Whatever they had in there sure was potent.

"Pardon me," I told the uniformed man outside, "but my Captain just had a terrible accident, and—"

The man smiled on me benignly. With him were three other uniformed figures, women, and several musical instruments. "Did he have too much to drink, brother?" the uniformed man asked me.

"Why, no. He fell from a great height."

"We all must beware the fall, brother," said the policeman. "If your friend mends his ways and henceforth toes the straight and narrow, I'm sure it is not too late. Isn't that right, sisters?"

His family said it was right. I began to think perhaps this wasn't a policeman after all.

"He can't mend his ways," I explained. "He's dead."

"Then you see, brother? You see? When a man falls—"

"Excuse me," I said. "Aren't you a policeman?"

The man shook his head. His sisters giggled. He said he belonged to some kind of an Army. He said they were here in Las Vegas to conduct a war against a fellow called Satan. From the number of such Army groups I encountered in Las Vegas, I would say this Satan fellow is outnumbered.

I walked on down the street. A man staggered toward me, humming softly. Incidentally, more people stagger in Las Vegas than anyplace else I visited on our expedition. Can anyone tell me why? "Sorry to bother you," I said. "I was wondering if you could tell me how to bury my captain."

"I hain't no undertaker, bud." The man made a strange noise, as if his lungs and his diaphram were out of co-ordination.

"Is that who I need? An undertaker?"

"A mortician, tha's right. Your friend shoot himself over a gambling debt? Maybe I ought to shoot myself. Take my advice and don't get taken by no faro games, bud." He made that strange noise again

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and staggered down the street.

A mortician, I thought. Now I was getting somewhere. I found a telephone book in an all-night eaterie, looked up "mortician" in the yellow pages and journeyed to a suburb of Las Vegas, where the Mortician Phineas McCoombs maintained his low rambling edifice. It was the nicest building on the block, and since it was now only nine-thirty, I didn't think I'd be getting Mortician Phineas McCoombs out of bed.

"I should like to see Mortician Phineas McCoombs," I said as someone answered my knock at the door.

The man was small, sallow, sad-looking. He was the only person I saw in Las Vegas not dressed in gay, bright colors. "I'm McCoombs," he said.

"The Mortician?"

"Yes."

"My Captain died."

"If he was in the service, I can't help you until the proper military authorities have been notified."

"It's nothing like that."

"Well then, shall we go and visit the deceased?"

"Is it necessary?"

"We must prepare the poor man's body, mustn't we? And incidentally, do you have a burial plot? My brother-in-law sells them reasonably, and—"

"Good. We'll take one back with us. But you can't touch the body, please."

"Take a burial plot back with us? I can't touch the body? Are you pulling my leg?"

"No, sir. I haven't touched you."

Naturally, I couldn't let the Mortician Phineas McCoombs or anyone near our captain. One look and he'd know we Martians were here on Earth, and we couldn't have that.

"You're s e r i o u s ?" McCoombs asked me.

"Yes, sir."

"Well. Exactly how did your friend die? Was a doctor present? Has a death certificate been signed?"

"He fell a hundred feet from a scaffold."

"May I see the death certificate, please?"

"There isn't any."

The Mortician Phineas McCoombs began to close the door of his edifice. "I'm afraid I can't help you," he said. "If no doctor was present, I suggest you call the police."

"The police? All right, sir. If you think that best."

I can't read human facial expressions very well, but the Mortician Phineas McCoombs

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seemed quite relieved when I left his home. Not much of a business man, I thought, then went back downtown to find a police station.

"I was wondering if you could help me," I told the uniformed man at the desk.

"That's what I'm here for. What's the trouble?"

"My friend died this afternoon."

"Accidental or natural causes?"

"Accidental."

"Why weren't we notified sooner?"

I was beginning to get annoyed. It's all well and good to be polite, but if you can't get anywhere. . . Besides, my synthetic body was beginning to grow uncomfortable. I said, "Look here. I already visited your Army, and they gave me the run-around. I was treated grossly by the Mortician Phineas McCoombs. I—"

"Sit down," the policeman advised me. "Suppose you answer some questions."

"All right."

"Where did your friend die?"

"Out on the desert."

"Oh. That's different. You ought to see the county sheriff, not us."

"I haven't the time. I'm in a hurry. I came here."

The policeman looked at me, scowled, scratched his head and said, "It's not our jurisdiction, but I almost hate to let you out of here. Sounds to me like you're trying to hide something."

Naturally, I was trying to hide something: our identity as Martians. "Perhaps I'd better go," I said.

"Perhaps you better stay. How did the deceased meet his death?"

"He fell."

"Fell, eh? His name?"

"I'm sorry, but I'd rather not tell you that. I think I'd rather go back to the desert. I think—"

"If you don't want to answer, we can't make you. As I said, we don't have jurisdiction. But the county sheriff ought to be mighty interested in your story."

"I'll go and find him," I said brightly. That was a lie, for I had no such intentions. But then, Earthmen didn't mind lying—as witness the policeman's statement. He was there to help me, he said. Yet he was doing his best *not* to help me. See what I mean?

"You'll stay here while I send for him."

So, I sat down while the policeman dialed a number on his telephone and was soon

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talking to the county sheriff. I was getting nowhere. It had seemed a simple matter to learn the proper entombment procedure and then execute it. But the more I tried the less likely it was that I'd have success. There was no telling what might happen if I waited for the county sheriff to come and fetch me. At the very least, there would be hours more of delay, additional questions which I couldn't answer. We'd be no closer to burying our captain than when I started. And at the worst, the first mate might decide I'd met with an accident, might figure he could not risk sending another man or my mission, and might blast-off for Mars without me. Emotionally, that would be bad enough. But try wearing a pair of contact lenses permanently and spread the feeling from your eyes all over your body and you'll see what I mean.

That settled it. I wasn't going to wait for any county sheriff.

I'll say this for that policeman: he didn't scare easily. I waited until the time came when we were alone in the big front room of the police station, then I began to concentrate my thoughts on my real Martian body. It isn't easy, but if you work on it hard enough, your synthetic body can take on the appearance of your real one for a few seconds at a time.

So, I changed—right before the policeman's eyes.

He gawked, and passed a hand before his face and he gawked some more. He never said a word about it, but just sat there watching me. When I got up and began to walk out of there, he didn't lift a finger to stop me. I still don't think he was particularly frightened. Awed, yes. A little suspicious of his own eyes and what they told him, certainly. But not frightened. Maybe he realized if he came after me and I felt like what I looked like he would then be afraid. Maybe that's why he let me get away.

Anyhow, I walked into the street, free as one of their proverbial birds. I decided I couldn't waste any more time with potential undertakers, musical armies and things like that. I had to find the real thing, and fast. I employed an ability we Martians have but don't use very often. It's a kind of watered-down telepathy. That is, we can't hold silent, mental conversations, but if we project our thought waves along certain electro-

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magnetic patterns, we can read the emotional content of minds.

I stood there on the streets of Las Vegas, doing just that. I was looking for the mind most concerned with death. Simple? Ingenious? I thought so. The mind most concerned with death would be able to tell me exactly what I had to know about burying our dead captain.

At last, I found it. The death-thoughts were as strong as any I've ever encountered. And they weren't coming from one man, but several. A convention of morticians, I thought happily. I could get my answers from them in a matter of minutes. I followed my nose, as the Earth expression goes, homing in on the death thoughts as if they were a radio beam.

It was a rundown adobe house on the edge of the desert. Municipal ordinance had not brought street lights to this section of booming Las Vegas yet. The streets were very dark and, surprisingly, almost deserted. I knocked on the door of the rundown adobe house and waited.

A slot popped open in the heavy wood paneling of the door. "Yeah?" said a voice. There was a patch of light, but I couldn't see any face. Naturally, by this time I was looking my synthetic-Earth-body self again.

"Is this the convention of morticians?" I asked.

"The which?"

"Convention of . . . well, never mind. Several people here are thinking very strongly of death, and I had some questions about death I wanted to ask them."

"Is this some kind of gag?" the voice asked me. The voice was not happy. The voice seemed to wish I would go away.

"I assure you, I wouldn't try to gag you in any way."

"Then get lost, will you?"

"That's a virtual impossibility. We're drawn excellent maps of this area. It would be most difficult to get lost, even if I wanted to, which I don't."

"Awright, Jack. Awright. You better wait here a minute." And the voice drifted off. I tried that modified telepathy trick again, just to make sure. Yes, sir. This certainly was the right place. Death thoughts were coming from every nook and cranny of the place.

A few moments later, the door opened suddenly. I was surprised, because the voice hadn't spoken to me, then

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surprised still further when two pairs of strong hands grabbed me and hauled me inside the house. The door was closed behind us. I was half-pushed, half-dragged down a dark hallway, up a flight of stairs. I was thrust into a room which was unexpectedly well-furnished. The door slammed behind me. A man said, "Sit down, wise guy."

I sat down. The man was tall, well-built, good-looking. I thought his selection of clothing was gaudy, though.

"What's your name?"

"It's Jack," I said, remembering what the voice downstairs had called me.

"Jack what?"

"Just—Jack."

"Listen, Jack. Would you like to get out of here alive?"

"Why, certainly. Why shouldn't I want to get out of here alive?"

"Then answer some questions. Did Louis send you?"

"I don't know any Louis."

"You don't know him, eh? How'd you know we were here? Louis knew. Then Louis and me had this fight. I'm waiting for Louis to try and foul things up. Just waiting. No one fouls things up for Manetti. Louis ought to know that."

"I can answer your question this time. I knew you were here because you were thinking so hard of death. It's why I came here. You see, my friend is dead, and I was wondering if you could go over the burial details with me. I won't take up your time, except for that."

"Listen, punk," said this man who called himself Manetti, "Did that Louis send you here to speak in riddles like this? Is that Louis' plan, to confuse me? He thinks maybe I confuse easy? Well get this, Jack boy. Y'know whose death I was thinking of? Not Louis'. Yours. I had a feeling Louis would send someone, not coming here himself to try and patch things up. I said to the boys, the first guy Louis sends over, we're gonna take him apart and send him back to Louis in little pieces."

"I'd never survive that, I'm afraid," I said.

"Cool one, ain't you?" Manetti said, then shouted: "Hey Max! Come on in."

Max soon appeared at the doorway of the room. Max was big, a head taller than Manetti, a head and a half taller than my synthetic Earth body. And Max was fat, so fat he hardly could fit through the doorway. He said, "What's up, boss?" He'd

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climbed the flight of stairs to get to this room and he was panting.

"This here's one of Louis' boys," Manetti informed him untruthfully. "You think that means Louis figures we're all set to hit him in the head when he comes here?"

"Naw," said the laconic Max.

"I do. With Louis, you got to be careful. I tell Louis I want he should come here so we patch things up and have one big happy mob again. Right away old Louis, he starts thinking. Why does Manetti make me an offer like that? Manetti don't need me. Maybe Manetti wants me to come and visit him, then, over the good pasta and chianti, Manetti will have me hit in the head and dropped somewhere in the desert. That Manetti, I'm gonna fix. You see, Max. That's how I think Louis thinks. So he sends this punk."

"No," I said, "the first mate sent me. You see, our captain—"

"A copper?" Max asked.

"Copper?" guffawed Manetti. "I know a cop when I see one. This guy is a hood like you, Max. A hood. Don't worry about cops."

"Well, you gotta stay on your toes."

"Poor old Max, said Manetti. "He will wish he kept on his toes after the reception we got cooked up for him. Won't he?"

"Yeah," said Max.

Manetti took a lethal instrument, an automatic revolver, size .45, from his pocket and said, "Want to start on his little playmate here?"

"It suits me," said Max.

"I'll tell you this," Manetti said. "I'll go to Louis' funeral. You can bet I'll go. I'll buy the flowers, even. I all the time cry at funerals, Max. A real sentimentalist."

"Schmaltzy," said Max.

"I can't help it. A sentimentalist. We'll see to it Louis has the biggest and best funeral ever seen this side of Chicago."

"Yeah," said Max. "The works."

"It's the least we can do. Louis used to be our friend."

"Say, that's wonderful," I said. "You do know about funerals, after all. Can you tell me something about this big one you're planning? How is the body taken to the place of entombment? If Louis' death is to be violent—as I believe it is from what you were saying—how will you have a death certificate made up for you? Is it necessary to buy a

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burial plot in advance? Does the plot go on Louis or Louis on the plot or both alongside each other? Oh, I have a million questions."

"A million," said Max.

Manetti shrugged, and for some reason slammed the size .45 automatic pistol across the side of my head. "Funny guy," said Manetti, "I got enough of you."

Naturally, the size .45 automatic pistol didn't hurt me. Our synthetic bodies are too tough for that, although I do believe one of the bullets (size .45) fired from the automatic pistol at close range and at a vital organ might do sufficient damage to kill me. Manetti looked very surprised when I just sat there and said, "This funeral, it's going to be a very good one?"

"Chrissake," Manetti mumbled. "He didn't even so much as blink."

"About the funeral—"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. When a big shot from the Syndicate like Louis kicks off, you can bet the funeral's some stuff. There's only one bigger Syndicate man in this whole State of Nevada."

I looked at the huge Max, who seemed the obvious candidate. "Max?" I said.

For some reason, it made them laugh. "Max," Manetti said. "That's pretty good. For a guy about to die, you got a sense of humor. Me, stupid, Me, Manetti. I'm the big shot. I'm the guy."

"Then your funeral would be even bigger?"

"Jack, we'll pull out every stop when I die."

I immediately went into a telepathic trance. I didn't know much about this Louis. But, I thought, enough to do what I had to. I started thinking of Louis. When I got a bead on him, to borrow your expression, I transmitted the following message:

LOUIS: MANETTI AND MAX ARE INVITING YOU TO THEIR RUNDOWN ADOBE HOUSE ON THE EDGE OF TOWN SO THEY CAN KILL YOU. THIS BEING THE CASE, WHY DON'T YOU COME ARMED AND WITH BODYGUARDS? A FRIEND.

Louis would start wondering how the thought-message suddenly popped up in his head, of course, but he might be cautious enough to pay attention to it. If he did, my worries were probably over—at least, regarding the ultimate disposition of our dead captain.

Someone was slapping my cheek. "What happened to

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him?" a voice said. "Heart-failure?"

The telepathic trance *does* resemble death, but I came out of it now and saw Max bending over me. "I'm all right," I said.

Max shrugged. "For a few more minutes."

Just then, there was yelling from downstairs. "It's Louis, boss!" a voice called up. It was the same voice which had greeted me at the door of the adobe house. And, from Louis' proximity, I had apparently got my message through barely in time. "He ain't alone," the voice said. "I don't like it, boss."

Gunfire interrupted whatever else he might have said. There were shouts, the sound of breaking glass and splintering wood, more gunfire. Feet pounded furiously on the stairs.

"Hey!" Max said, and turned on me with the size .45 Manetti had given him.

Max and I wrestled. Max must have been surprised, because he weighed at least twice what I did. His body, though, couldn't possibly have been as strong as my synthetic one. I had him pinned in a matter of seconds. The footsteps had stopped on the stairs, as if some of Manetti's people had stopped the invaders half way up.

"Hold it," Manetti said.

I was holding Max's gun. Manetti was holding another one, pointing at the back of my head with it. "Drop it," Manetti said.

"First you tell me to hold it, then drop it—"

"Just drop it."

I dropped the gun. It hit Max's face. Max screamed.

"Now, stand up," Manetti said.

"We're dropping 'em like flies," a voice called from downstairs. Apparently the first assault of Louis' forces had been beaten off the stairs.

This wouldn't do at all, I thought. From what I had heard—at Manetti's own admission—Manetti, Louis, Max and the others were the dregs of society. If they didn't die now, today, it might be next week, or next month or the month after that. It would be soon and society wouldn't miss them.

But the fight was too one-sided. Louis' forces needed help. They needed a diversion.

The rest, I guess, is tabloid newspaper history on Earth, although my precise role in it is quite unknown. I picked Max up off the floor. I used him as a shield and started

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walking toward Manetti. Manetti got scared.

"Keep back!" Manetti cried. He seemed amazed I could carry the huge Max so easily. He ought to have tried one of these synthetic bodies.

"Keep back!" Manetti pleaded.

But I didn't want to hurt Manetti. I'd leave him for Louis, and Louis for him, or any combination thereof. I simply walked to Manetti while I carried three-hundred-pound Max rather easily with one arm. I took the size .45 automatic from Manetti's nerveless fingers, thanked him, and headed for the door with Max. Reaching it, I got the door opened with my foot and took in the situation. Manetti's men were on the stairs. Louis' men were on the landing below them, their ranks already casualty-riddled. Unless I helped Louis' forces, the fight was going to be too uneven.

I lifted Max over my head and hurled him at Manetti's hoods on the stairs. They all fell, and so did the bannister.

After that, all I had to do was keep on ducking the bullets and wait for the police. By the time they came, the box score was quite impressive.

As I said, the rest you know. How the gang-style funeral was the most impressive ever seen west of Chicago. How thousands of people stopped to watch the mile-long funeral procession wend its way slowly down the streets of Las Vegas. There were a lot of important criminals buried that day, each with the singular honor paid to him by his fellows. There was Twelve O'clock McGrath, Dizzie Siegal, Tick Tock Tupper, Harry (The Shiv) Halloran, Max Mugglesby, Louis (The Lip) Bruckner, a few other assorted hoods and—naturally—Manetti. Manetti's casket was by far the fanciest of all.

So was Manetti's hearse. In fact, it was so ornate, so gilded, so large and flower-bedecked, that no one noticed the addition, the smaller, plainer casket adjacent to it in the lead hearse.

Captain Lodor's death wish was realized.

THE END

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FOR THE GREATER GOOD

By P. F. COSTELLO

When a bad ball team starts winning them all, there's got to be a reason. Well, we want you to meet the reason: Henry Hillman, who can't even throw a ball — or hit one!

GABBY GATES, manager of the New York Eagles, was vaguely aware that someone had entered the dugout and was seated on the bench beside him. But Gates kept his eyes glued grimly to the playing field where his charges were engaged in batting practice, and where the action held him spellbound.

Gabby had been in the big leagues for twenty years; he'd seen the good and the bad, but never in his life had he witnessed such a miserable exhibition of blundering incompetence.

"A fine, manly group," the visitor—whoever he was—said primly and cheerfully. "I'm sure one of them will hit the ball any moment now."

Still, Gabby could not bring himself to glance at the newcomer. He could only writhe inwardly from the humiliation. One of those newspaper clowns, of course. Couldn't be anyone else. No one ever came to see the Eagles except an occasional sports-writer who was sent out to the club by way of penance for some infraction. And all they ever brought with them were insults.

Well, let 'em have their fun, Gabby told himself doggedly. There'd come a day when they'd have to eat their scoffing words; a day when the Eagles would wake up and win a pennant.

Of course, Gabby had no way of knowing when that day would come, but he was an optimist by nature and felt no ball team could occupy the cellar for more than two generations; the very law of averages were dead against such a thing. But, in the case of the New York Eagles, the box scores said otherwise, and Gabby was beginning to

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lose the fresh edge of fine enthusiasm he'd brought to the club six seasons ago.

"There," said the voice. "Didn't I tell you?" The words followed a sharp crack of the bat in the hands of Suggsy Leach. (*Batting average,* .086—12 *runs batted in during the previous season.*)

But it was a hit, even though most of the sound came from a splintering bat rather than any impact with the horsehide. Suggsy had tried desperately to get out of the way of what looked to him like an inside pitch and had hit the ball by mistake and sent it dribbling toward the mound. The pitch, of course, had been outside by a good two feet and had afforded no danger to anyone except a possible innocent bystander; but Suggsy was the cautious type, besides not being able to see very well and the ball had looked plenty dangerous to him.

At the sound of the breaking bat, Sam Stephens at shortstop (186 *chances*—80 *errors*) was jerked from a reverie that dealt with trout-fishing in the creek back home. Sam charged the ball, but had the misfortune to kick it just before he got there with his glove.

Norm Mason, the pitcher, (*previous year's record* 1-25) made a fine backhanded attempt, but the ball refused to jump into his glove because it had come to a dead stop a moment before. Norm grabbed the ball, however, and threw it seven feet over the first baseman's head into the stands.

Gabby Gates put his face in his hands and said, "All right, go ahead with the insults. I can take 'em. I'm a guy that's been conditioned to abuse."

"Insults are a waste of time. So are compliments."

Gabby glanced at the speaker for the first time and saw a neatly-dressed, fiftyish little man with a gray bowler hat parked four-square on a rather large head. "What paper do you write for?" Gabby asked.

"Oh, I'm not a journalist. Allow me to introduce myself. Henry Hillman is the name."

"How come you're here in Eagle Park? Lost or something?"

"No. I came out to inform you that the Eagles are going to start winning their games." Henry Hillman smiled warmly. "What do you think of that?"

"I think you're overdue for the paper-doll factory," Gab-

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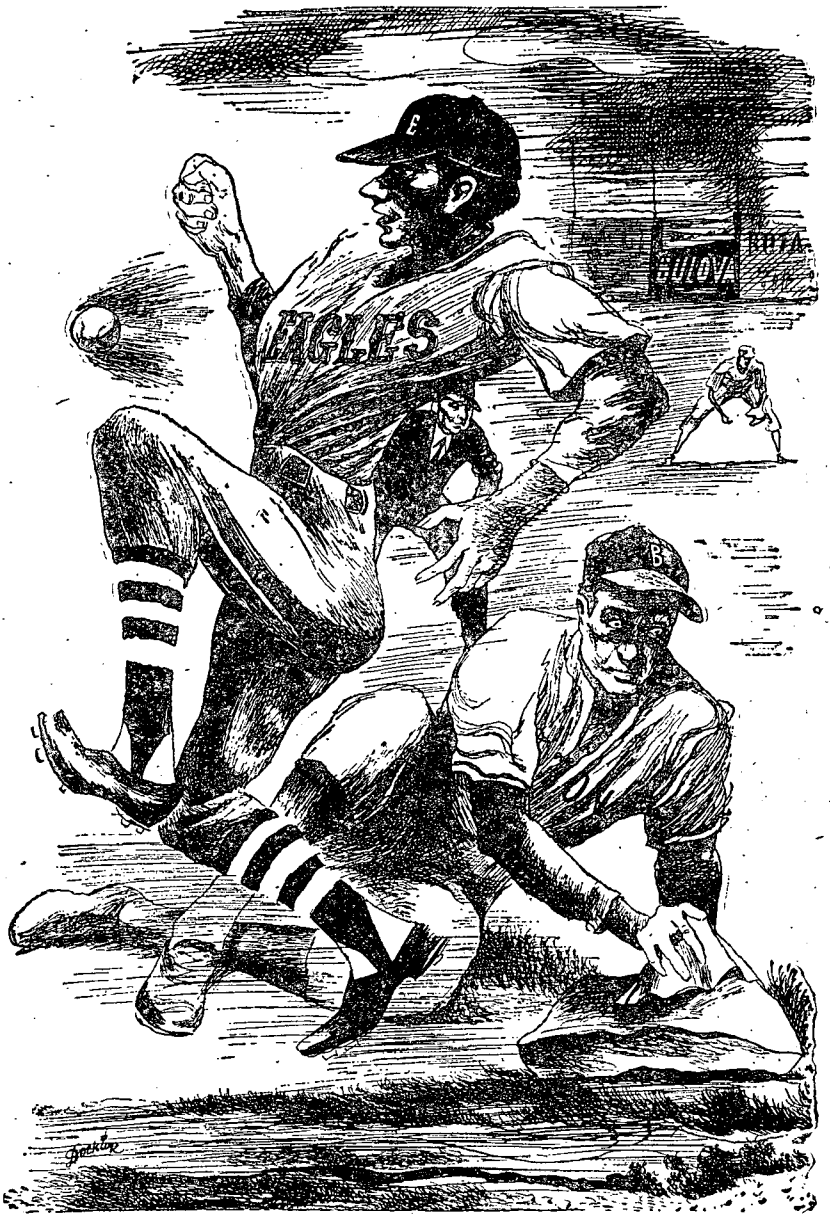

Never mind the runner; second base needs dusting!

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by snapped. "Anybody who'd —" Gabby paused as the crack of a bat sounded over Eagle Park. He looked out hopefully to discover that Barney Kane, the Eagle pinch hitter (*runs batted in*: 2), had lofted a fly to centerfield, where Marty Adams (*flies caught*—15; *flies dropped*—96) was waiting for it. But Gabby cringed back on the bench as Adams lost the ball in the sun, even though the sky was heavily overcast, and fled in panic with his arms curled over his head. He was not able to avoid the ball, however. It slugged him on the back of the neck.

Henry Hillman sprang to his feet. "Good heavens! The man is hurt!"

Gabby shook his head. "Uh-uh. A skull of iron. How do you think he's lived so long out there with only his wits for protection?"

Henry Hillman smiled gently. "I imagine what you're trying to tell me is that the Eagles are not the best ball team in the country."

"How could they be?" Gabby asked, "when they're the worst? You can't hold down both ends at once."

"I'll get right to the point," Hillman said. "When I said the Eagles will start winning, I wasn't merely talking. They'll win because I'm going to see that they do."

"If you've scouted up any material, forget it. We've hardly got money enough to buy balls, let alone ball players. Just the other day a big timer from Arapahoe, Nebraska, came in and offered Jim Wills, the Eagles' owner, five hundred dollars for the franchise and Jim almost took it. Would have, but the guy could only come up with a hundred and twenty-five cash."

"No, my boy," Henry Hillman said. "This is something quite different. I intend to personally help the Eagles."

"You planning to go out and pitch, maybe?"

Henry Hillman sat wrapped in thought for a few moments. "The explanation is rather complicated and I doubt if you would be in a very receptive mood at the moment. Perhaps it would be better if I showed you some results first."

"That would be ducky," Gates said without much zest.

"Very well. Is there a game today?"

"There sure is. Two-thirty —with the Detroit Demons."

"Are these—ah, Demons pretty good?"

"They've made claims along

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that line. There's some would say they lead the league nineteen games just by accident—but not very many."

"Then, if the Eagles trounce the Demons convincingly this afternoon, it would give weight to what I've said?"

"If the Eagles win today," Gabby said miserably, "it would mean the Demons could put no men in the field and lose by default."

"Very well. I'll be here at game time and—"

Gabby Gates, in a mood to grab at straws as weak as even Henry Hillman, said, "Where would you like to sit? Say the word and I'll put a rocking chair out by the mound for you."

"That won't be necessary. I'll be in the grandstand—or possibly, the bleachers." Henry Hillman got up and tipped his gray bowler and walked away. Gabby's eyes followed him—and Gabby's pathetic voice. "Anywhere in the park, bub, you'll be all by yourself." Then he turned his attention back to the field and watched various forms of baseball sacrilege being committed until he could stand it no longer and called the Eagles in.

Gabby was heading for the showers himself when he caught sight of a big red-headed man veering down from the deserted press box to cut him off. Gabby looked around for a means of escape but found himself trapped in the tunnel, and the red-head—Fleming of the *Daily Beacon*—approached him with a grin.

"What are you doing out here?" Gabby asked with belligerence. He spoke that way because belligerence was all he had left.

"Heard a rumor that this crummy outfit was disbanding. Thought I'd come out to write the obit."

"All right, wise guy! Let me tell you something. The Eagles are going to start winning! They're going to make you scribblers look like a bunch of bums!"

While Fleming laughed, Gabby—a little dizzy from anger and humiliation—tried to remember where he'd heard that. Oh, sure—the little coot with the gray hat. Gabby got a little sick inside. Things had come to a point where any ray of hope—however asinine—could cause him to open his big mouth. He pushed Fleming aside and rushed into the locker room where another crisis was waiting for him. Bill Torgeson, his sec-

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ond baseman had tripped over a shoe someone left by his locker and appeared to have broken a toe.

Gabby sat glumly in the dugout at 2:30 and watched the Demon centerfielder step to the plate. His name was Cornhobber and there was nothing outstanding about him except that he was leading both leagues with a batting average of .398 and had knocked out 28 home runs.

Norm Mason got the sign, glowered at Cornhobber and sent a floater over the plate. It would have been a nice change-of-pace pitch, except Gabby and the whole baseball world knew Mason couldn't throw any harder than that. The pitch was Mason's fast ball.

Cornhobber waited around until it finally got to the plate and then belted it toward the centerfield fence. A home run did not result, however, because of two things; the ball hit the flag pole about a foot below the place Old Glory was waving in the breeze and bounced back into the park. By sheer accident, it bounced straight into the glove of Barney Kane, the centerfielder, who stood there staring at it. Cornhobber could still have circled the bases while Kane stood there frozen with surprise, but the Demon ace had tripped halfway to first base and was sitting on the ground holding his ankle. However, at the urging from the first base coach, he was able to crawl the rest of the way on his hands and knees before someone went out and got the ball from Kane and threw it in.

A pinch runner was put in for Cornhobber and there you had it. A home run turned amazingly—but logically—into a single.

After that, Mason's floater seemed to develop a sort of wobble that fascinated the next two Demon batters. They appeared loathe to swing—seemingly more interested in counting the stitches as the ball went by. Both woke up in time to get scratch singles, however, and the bases were loaded.

Then Mason, full of stern resolve, scowled darkly and threw a wild pitch into the press box above the screen. The Demon runners charged down the base paths and three runs seemed surely in the making.

But a strange thing happened. The runner on third base had somehow gotten his cleats fastened into the third sack and he fell headlong—

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like a steer roped at the ankles. Before he could get untangled, the other two runners charged into the sack. The umpire took one look at the three runners all milling confusedly at third and jerked up his thumb. "Youse is all t'ree out!" he yelled in disgust.

And so went the game: scoreless until the eighth, when Suggsy stepped to bat. And, unknown to anyone in the park, a little man in a gray bowler whispered from a seat in the grandstand: "Just close your eyes and swing the bludgeon as the ball goes by. Just do that and everything will be all right, son. You will triumph over your adversaries."

And, inexplicably—though he would never have admitted it publicly—Suggsy did just that. As the little man had predicted, Suggsy achieved great triumph over the Demons by belting the horsehide over the fence and into a dead-end street some distance away.

The blow won the game, final score 1-0, with the dazed Demons walking toward the dressing room eyeing each other with suspicion.

Someone else was suspicious also. Fleming of the *Daily Beacon*. In his column that afternoon, he wrote:

> Ever since the infamous Black Sox scandal of evil memory, the game of baseball has been as clean as a hound's tooth. But, after seeing the demonstration at Eagle's Park today, one is forced to wonder what gives. One hesitates to shout collusion just because the Eagles won a ball game. Any team, it would seem, has a perfect right to win a ball game once in a while. But let's face it—does that include the New York Eagles? Can the law of averages be said to include hitting a flag pole? A base runner falling down halfway to first? Three runners congregating on third to discuss cabbages and batting averages? A shortstop mistaking an empty ice cream cup for the ball and throwing his arm out attempting to hurl said cup to first base?
>
> One hesitates to give a public *yes* in answer. Yet common sense forbids an unqualified *no*. Could this be a dark and dastardly plot to keep a dying ball team alive long enough to bilk the public out of a few dollars by staging a circus?
>
> One is forced to reserve judgment.

After the players had gone home, Gabby Gates still sat in the dugout, looking across the deserted field. His head was buzzing as a result of the strange thoughts whirling around inside. He was still sitting thus, when Henry Hillman came down from the

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grandstand and entered the dugout.

Gabby jerked a startled head. "Oh, it's you."

Hillman smiled and sat down. "I waited until you were alone so we could talk undisturbed."

Gabby stared blankly. "Talk? Oh, sure."

"You seem a trifle shocked, Mr. Gates."

"Me—oh, no. Everything's jolly. I've just gone nuts—that's all."

"Not a bit of it. What you saw was entirely logical."

"Maybe that's a name for it, but—"

"Let me explain."

"I'd sure like that."

"First, we must go back to basic principals."

"I think we ought to go back to something—that's for sure."

"You see, Mr. Gates, there are very few people alive who can begin to conceive the power of the human mind. I've made a study of mental possibilities, Mr. Gates, and after a few experiments I became convinced that a single mind, strengthened and trained, can direct and influence the actions of all matter."

Gabby brushed a hand across his forehead and muttered, "Three men on third. I'll be a—"

"You'll be a successful manager, if you'll just listen to me."

"I'm listening, mister—I sure am!"

"This science I've developed—if it can be called that—springs basically from *yoga*—"

"You mean Yogi Berra of the Yankees? He's good, but—"

"No. *Yoga* is an ancient religion or school of thought—whatever you wish to call it—that tells us the mind is all powerful. It's an established fact that few people use even a tenth of their brain power. The brain, then—in most people—is like an undeveloped arm in an athlete. With the right kind of exercise, the arm strengthens and becomes powerful. So it is with the brain."

Gates turned to look thoughtfully at Hillman. "I think maybe I'm getting it. You just think about something? Think about what you want to happen and it does?"

"That's a general explanation although in practice it becomes more definite."

"You mean that sitting in the stands, you just told those three guys to get together on third and they—?"

"Somewhat oversimplified, but that's about it."

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"And you *thought* that ball Suggsy hit right out of the park?"

"In a way. I *thought* the pattern, you might say. I created, in my brain, the structure of the incident as I wanted it to occur, and my thought-picture was strong enough to make the incident conform."

"But you can't do it again," Gabby said fearfully.

"On the contrary, I can do it repeatedly. Perhaps you would like a clear-cut demonstration."

"I sure would."

Hillman looked out across the park and pointed to a groundskeeper who was smoothing out cleat tracks around second base. "You see that man out there? I'll attempt to make him do something he would not do otherwise."

"What?"

"He's just leaving the field. We'll wait until he gets off the diamond."

After a few moments, Gabby turned his eyes from the man—who was heading for the toolhouse under the grandstand—and looked at Hillman. The latter sat with his hands tightly clasped in his lap, his spine straight, his head bent slightly forward. There was an intense look on his face and his eyes were narrowed. All in all, he reminded Gabby of a man with a sudden and violent stomachache.

Then Gabby heard him speaking softly; he said, "Return to first base and make sure you have done a good job. Return immediately to first base . . ."

The groundskeeper stopped suddenly and looked back at first. He scowled, then resumed his interrupted trip to the toolhouse.

"Go back to first base," Hillman whispered, the look on his face intensifying.

The man stopped again. Then, with a quick gesture that seemed to say, *Oh, all right. If you insist,* he turned and went swiftly back to first.

"Smooth it all out again," Hillman muttered.

The groundskeeper obliged, although he appeared to be a little short-tempered about it. He went over the ground again and then headed for the grandstand with a determination that boded ill for anyone who tried to "think" him back to work again.

"Well I'll be damned," Gabby said. He looked at Henry Hillman, his eyes shining. "You know—I've got a hunch

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you can be a big help to the Eagles."

"And the Eagles will be a big help to me."

"What do you want out of this? What's the deal?"

"Deal?"

"How much money will it cost us?"

"Oh, I have plenty of money. The work itself will be my reward."

"You mean you're an Eagle fan?"

"Not exactly. I'm just interested in perfecting my technique."

"Well that's just fine," Gabby said, and he staggered from the dugout toward the dressing room—drunk with happiness.

When Henry Hillman began exerting his peculiar influence on the fortunes of the Eagles, that team was—of course—in last place, fifteen games behind the league-leading Detroit Demons, even though the season was young and the Eagles had only played sixteen engagements.

But now they began winning and attendance picked up as people came to the park to see the weird and wonderful things that happened.

In every case the element of success lay in the opposition rather than in the Eagles. As Henry Hillman explained it to Gabby: "Causing your players to excel in the game is very tiring mentally. For instance, I've discovered that it takes three and a half times more mental energy to cause one of your outfielders to catch a fly than it does to make an opponent drop one. And as for making them hit a ball—" Here Henry Hillman smiled wearily. "Sometimes it goes beyond my poor powers and must be classified in the category of miracles."

Gabby sighed. "Well, either way, you're doing all right, Mr. Hillman. We've climbed up to fourth place. But I'm worried about something."

"What's that?"

Gabby took a clipping from his shirt pocket. "I cut this out of Fleming's column in the *Daily Beacon.*"

The clipping read in part:

> . . . and for this reason, the writer is concerned about the future of baseball. When a team of incompetents like the Eagles can win eleven in a row, then there is something radically wrong somewhere. Even the more so when they win by playing just as bad ball as they played when they roosted in the cellar for lo, those many years.
>
> In short, it's not that the Eagles are bad; it's that the other teams are worse when they play the New York team.

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Witness this: The Detroit Demons, one of the best ball clubs ever assembled, committed, to date, eleven errors in fifty-five games, excluding engagements with the Eagles. But in the nine times they have faced the New York aggregation they have dropped twenty-one flies — fumbled seventeen infield chances, and have batted, as a club, an astounding .021.

And it is exactly the same with any other club the Eagles face. For some reason, every club in the league quits playing when they face the Eagles. Is there some vast program of mass intimidation functioning?

Henry Hillman read the clipping and said, "Hmmm. I never realized before that baseball was considered important enough to concern anyone so deeply. I thought it was merely a sport—a game. You mean this man actually takes it seriously?"

"I'll say he does! And I think it would be a good idea not to win every game. It might start a Congressional investigation. In fact maybe we better not beat the Washington Senators at all. Some of them congressmen might get pretty sore."

"You know?" Henry Hillman said, "it never before occurred to me that what we're doing could be dishonest—"

"Oh, don't get that idea," Gabby said hurriedly. "It's nothing but jolly good fun, really."

"To me, there has been only the scientific aspect involved; it seemed to me that ball players were ideal subjects upon which to strengthen my powers. Who really wins or loses is a matter of no concern whatever to me—that is, other than as a demonstration of my ability to influence events."

"Sure—sure. It really don't matter nohow—as long as the Eagles come out on top. I—"

"Let me think it over for a while. I'll give you my decision tomorrow."

Gabby spent a sleepless night, and he had died a little by game time of the following day. He had not been contacted by Henry Hillman and he watched the diamond for a verdict.

The Eagles were playing the St. Louis Malts, and Gabby sat tense until, in the third inning, Joe Blake, the Malts' fleet outfielder (25 *bases stolen*), tripped over his own feet halfway home from third and dug up three feet of dirt with his nose. Obviously, Henry Hillman was still functioning.

After the game, Gabby sought out Hillman in his grandstand seat and said,

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"Listen, forget what I said about not beating the Senators. Let Congress investigate all it wants to. We're doing fine."

But Henry Hillman, while he'd helped the Eagles win—or rather, while he'd won for them—was not completely at ease. He had told himself that this mental practice he was getting was more important than the end result of any baseball series, he was not completely convinced. He bought a paper and read Fleming's column on the Eagles-Malts game. It was rather disquieting to an essentially fair-minded man:

> Today, the writer saw nine left-footed slobs walk onto a ball field and completely demoralize one of the finest teams ever assembled. That's about the only term that can be used to describe the unspeakable rise of the New York Eagles. The Eagles have not played one whit better than before they started—you'll pardon the expression—winning. But, faced by this lumbering collection of misfits, opposing speedball pitchers start tossing basketballs; brilliant fielders go stone blind and run aorund the the outfield in pitiful circles; fine, alert basemen stand like broken-spirited bums from the Bowery.
>
> The reason for the phenomenon is not known, even to the players themselves, but something is being done to a fine old game that is well nigh irreparable. Public confidence. . . .

Henry Hillman put down the clipping and repaired to a telephone. He called the *Daily Eagle* and asked for Mr. Fleming, the sportswriter.

"So that is the story, Mr. Fleming," Hillman said. "And now I'm faced with a serious dilemma."

Fleming came out of his daze and shook his head slowly. "Mr. Hillman, normally I'd say you were talking through your hat. I say that if I hadn't seen things in Eagle Park that defy any other explanation than yours. Now, I'm convinced. And I'm thankful the remedy is so simple."

"Simple?"

"Of course. All you have to do is stop this hexing business of yours."

"There is a great deal of difference between my scientific endeavors and what you call hexing, but we'll let that pass. But, as I said, the problem is not simple."

"Maybe you'll tell me why."

"Of course. I came to you with an explanation because I wanted to be completely honest and I felt you were entitled to an explanation. In short, I felt I had an obliga-

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tion to you as a lover of the game."

"I appreciate that."

"But I also have an obligation to the Eagles."

"How so? Everything you've given them is gravy. How would you short them by stopping?"

"A rather complicated point of ethics, I suppose, but I've established a pattern by aiding them—I've been giving them help they've come to expect of me. Have I any right to stop abruptly and leave them in the lurch so to speak?"

"Have you any right to go on hurting the other clubs?"

"As I said, a complicated point and I have to reject that last because my obligation is solely to the Eagles. So far as I am concerned no other club enters into it."

Fleming scratched his head. He knew he was up against an honest man, but also a tough nut. He could think of nothing to say and finally Henry Hillman sighed and said, "I guess, until some good reason for desisting comes along, I'll have to continue helping the Eagles."

None of the arguments Fleming could think of prevailed at all. He couldn't follow Hillman's line of reasoning, but that made no difference so long as he couldn't talk him out of it.

"Are you going to make my story public?" Hillman asked.

Fleming shook his head. "I'd just make a fool of myself. Nobody would believe it."

Fleming went back to his office and that day, the Eagles beat the Boston Bombers by a score of 1-0. Fleming left in the middle of the game, no longer able to see baseball profaned.

He dragged himself wearily into his office and sat down to his typewriter. He put a sheet of paper in the machine and sat with fingers poised. Should he reveal the whole mess? Risk making a fool of himself? He had to do something. Was that the only alternative?

Then an idea was born in his mind; brilliant, he thought. But after a second time over, his enthusiasm tempered a bit. If he could put it over, it would be brilliant. Otherwise, it would turn out as just another dud.

Fleming called on Henry Hillman at his home that evening. Fleming said, "I want to congratulate you on today's performance. Making the Bomber second baseman polish the base, while an Eagle

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player charged down the line, was a duzy."

"I felt rather badly about it myself," Hillman returned. "The poor fellow had a terrible time trying to explain the act."

Fleming shrugged. "He said he saw a dirty spot on the base and wanted to wipe it off. That was as good an explanation as any."

"I suppose so."

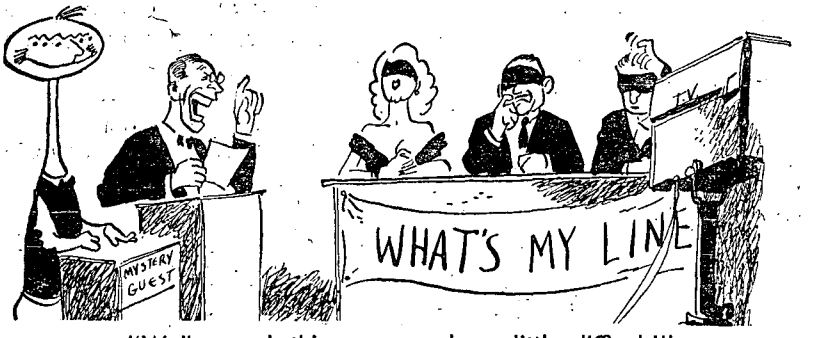
"That wasn't what I came to talk to you about, though, Mr. Hillman. I've been giving your problem a lot of thought and I respect your ethics." Fleming didn't respect Hillman's ethics at all. He didn't even understand them. He only knew he had a tough nut to crack here and he loved baseball, so he began talking. He talked for an hour and then he went home and because he was so tired, he went to bed early.

But he was at Eagle Park the next afternoon to see the game between the Eagles and the Bombers. And he sat tense in the press box because he didn't know whether he'd gotten anywhere with Henry Hillman or not.

But as the game progressed, he began to relax. Then he grinned. And when the game was over, he went away happy, because the Bombers beat the Eagles 19-0. They slaughtered them. They annihilated them. They treated them exactly as the record books, the law of averages, and common sense said the Bombers should treat the Eagles.

And baseball was back to normal.

It was exactly the opposite with Gabby Gates. As the game progressed, he went from a relaxed state into one of extreme tension. And, at



"Well, panel, this one may be a little difficult!"

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the finish, he viewed the score with a distinctly hollow sensation in his stomach.

But he refused to panic. After all, a man could get sick once in a while and thus miss a ball game. Take Henry Hillman. He was probably at home—down with a cold or the grippe or cancer or something. After finding no trace of his savior in the stands, Gabby hurried to his home to find out.

Henry Hillman was there, but he was not sick. He invited the Eagle manager in and bade him be seated. Gabby smiled cheerfully and said, "Took a day off, eh, Mr. Hillman?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, a day off. Well, all of us need a change sometimes. And like I told you—it's best that the Eagles don't win 'em all."

Hillman had seemed a little vague—as though his mind were somewhere else. "The Eagles?"

"Yeah. Our ball team—remember?"

"Oh, of course. I'm afraid I'd forgotten them completely."

"Forgotten the Eagles?"

"Yes. I am now occupied with more important things. I've suddenly realized—or been told—how great my powers are, and I can no longer waste them on so petty a thing as a ball game."

"But Mr. Hillman—"

The latter's eyes were starry with determination and purpose. And his mind remained far away. "What were you saying?"

"I was going to ask—what's more important than the Eagles?"

"Oh, many things—but one thing most of all."

Gabby was enough of a realist to know it was all over—that the gravy train had pulled out. "Then we're on our own again?"

"Yes—but if you want to follow my work from now on, I'll give you a tip. Just watch the newspapers. Read about the Geneva conference . . ."

That night Gabby gloomily got a paper. He skipped the sports section where the Eagles' latest defeat (21-0) was recorded. But on the front page, he found a very enlightening item:

RUSSIAN ENVOY IN ACCIDENT AT GENEVA

Today, in Geneva, the Russian Minister, Serge Kalinkoff, fell as he was approaching the conference hall and broke his leg. There was no apparent obstacle that could have caused . . .

THE END

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The KILLER WITHIN

By C. H. THAMES

One by one the heads of Earth's governments were dying by assassination—and always the killer was someone incapable of such an act. Could it be some sort of creeping madness—or had an alien mind taken this method of conquest?

THE morning I arrived in Washington, a secret service man shot and killed Senator Wayne Hartsell of Texas without provocation. Naturally, there was quite a fuss at the airport and even more of a fuss at the Capitol. I didn't get to see Senator Theron Demaret's administrative assistant until late afternoon at the Senate Office Building, and by then I was ready to leave my bag unpacked and head straight back for New York.

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She was no longer the girl he loved—but his executioner!

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"Loring Graham will see you, Mr. Moran," the blonde secretary told me. Then her voice dropped down the register to a confidential tone as she asked, "Are you really Craig Moran, the detective?"

"Yes," I said.

"Boy! I hear the latest book about you outsold Mike Hammer by fifty thousand copies. Only, you're for real."

I said, "I didn't write the book." This was called underplaying, and it always works. It must have been habit, because I hadn't come to Washington to blow my own horn. As far as I knew, I was already hired—although I didn't really know why.

"Boy," the blonde said, as I headed for the inner office. "Craig Moran, the famous private detective."

Since she was secretary and receptionist to Theron Demaret, not only Washington's most prominent Senator but the man who was being groomed by his party for the presidential nomination at the next election, I didn't think I rated all the fanfare, but I let it pass and went through the door marked LORING GRAHAM, *Administrative Assistant.*

Graham's telegram, received this morning, had been brief and to the point: URGENT BUSINESS FOR YOU IN WASHINGTON WITH NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS STOP COME IMMEDIATELY IN EXTREME CONFIDENCE STOP IS TWO THOUSAND DOLLAR RETAINER SATISFACTORY QUESTION MARK LORING GRAHAM ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT TO SENATOR THERON DEMARET.

The office was large and furnished expensively but in good taste with heavy leather upholstered chairs, a small book-case and a large, leather-topped desk. A girl was sitting at the desk and poring over some papers as I entered.

"Excuse me, Miss," I said. "Loring Graham is expecting me."

"Just have a seat, Mr. Moran."

I sat down and I waited and after ten minutes I began to stew. "Look," I said. "I've been in Washington since early morning trying to see Mr. Graham. I got the run-around at the airport because of the Hartsell assassination. I got the run-around at the Capitol for the same reason. Now, will you please strain yourself just a little and tell Mr. Graham I'm here?"

She didn't look up. She said, "There isn't any Mr. Graham."

I got up and I didn't hide

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my mounting anger. "What the hell do you mean by that?" I said.

"There is no *Mr.* Graham. I am Loring Graham, Moran. I'll be with you in a moment."

So, I cooled my heels and studied her and was surprised. Loring Graham, a woman. I hadn't expected it. In my mind I was already calling her Lorie, but I was willing to bet she'd want Miss Graham instead. She looked the type, but pretty. She wore a severely tailored dark suit with a little froth of white at the neck to show the suit belonged to a woman. It wasn't necessary. Loring Graham had long gleaming copper-colored hair and a figure which sent the suit scurrying off in various delightful curving directions and when she looked up she had eyes as green as chlorophyl and, like chlorophyl, she took my breath away.

"I have half a mind to fire you," she said coldly.

I just looked at her. This seemed to be a day of surprises.

"I wired you to come in confidence, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"You gave your name to the receptionist."

"But she's *your* receptionist," I protested.

"I don't care if she's my mother. Confidence means exactly what I thought a man in your position knows it means. I'm disappointed in you, Moran."

The first thing a private detective tries to do is put the client on the defensive. There are going to be delays. There always are. Keep the client dangling and he'll tolerate delays. Only, Miss Loring Graham had beat me to the punch. "I'm sorry," I grumbled. "No one else knows."

"All right, we'll let it pass. Moran, have you any idea why I hired you?"

"Nope," I said.

"Are you always so flip?"

I grinned at her, then said seriously, "It's out of character if I'm not."

"Well, I'm not only Senator Demaret's administrative assistant, I'm his niece. I have a personal interest in all this. I've sent for you because I want you to be my uncle's bodyguard."

"His bodyguard?" Go back to New York and get your poker face, Moran, I thought. You're not doing too well, believe me.

"His bodyguard."

"But I thought the secret service—"

"Moran, don't you read the newspapers? Didn't you see

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what happened at the airport this morning?"

"Senator Hartsell was shot and killed."

"By a secret service man. Moran, Hartsell was the fifth member of Congress to be assassinated in the past two months. And the list is even more impressive than that. We've lost five generals and admirals, four state governors, two of the president's cabinet ministers, seven corporation tycoons. And it isn't just the United States."

"No," I said. "And I do read the papers."

"Good. Then you know the same thing is happening in England, in France, Sweden, Australia, Italy. Even in Russia, Moran! At first everyone thought it was the Commies, but they've lost a whole bunch of Politburo members, not to mention Marshall Bulganin and a handful of other high officials. Moran, for some reason nobody can explain, there's a fantastic rash of assassinations all over the world. And that's why I sent for you."

"Then I'm to see that nothing like that happens to Senator Demaret?"

Loring Graham took out a checkbook, scribbled on the first check, detatched it and handed it to me. Two thousand dollars, in bright blue ink and still wet. "You can consider this as a retainer or your first month's pay. We may want you with us indefinitely. Is it satisfactory?"

"Yes," I said, and hardly had a chance to get it out.

"Good. You're to trust no one. Absolutely no one. It's why I wanted you here in extreme confidence. These assassinations have followed an incredible pattern. A man is usually killed by someone quite close to him, a relative, a friend, or, in Senator Hartsell's case, a secret service man. It's as if everyone has suddenly become capable of murder. People who've led exemplary lives, that sort of thing. It's like—well—like an unknown something *makes* them commit murder. Not just anyone is killed. Important people. Influential people. Killed by their friends and confidants. That's why I wanted this extremely confidential. I thought if no one knew you were here in this capacity—"

"I understand," I said.

"But I want to make sure. Listen, Moran. I said, trust no one. I meant that. Don't even trust me. We're all suspect, as far as you're concerned. Everyone who comes into contact with the Senator.

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If it's in the line of your duties, you can poke me in the teeth six days a week and twice on Sunday. You understand?"

I nodded and was about to say I did, when the door opened. Nobody had to make introductions. I knew my man. Except for the president, there isn't a face that appears in the nation's newspapers with more regularity than Senator Demaret's. He was a tall distinguished-looking man who walked in right out of a Man of Distinction advertisement. When the voters stopped electing him, I thought, they would no longer be impressed by anything.

"Hello, Lorie," he said in a deep, rich voice, a voice perfectly suited to tell everyone about the state of the nation on a coast-to-coast TV hookup. "Is this Mr. Moran?"

I nodded, but Lorie said nothing. She reached into a drawer of her desk and came up with a small pistol. I was so surprised, I just sat there for a couple of seconds watching her, but then I remembered what she told me and the two-thousand-dollar check tucked in my pocket. I took two long steps across the room, leaned across the big desk, slapped the gun from Lorie's hand and twisted her arm behind her until she stood up, wincing with pain.

"O.K., Moran," she gritted. "That's enough."

I didn't let go. I held her that way and looked quite calmly at the Senator, who was shocked. I said, "Is this girl really your niece, Senator?"

He managed to say yes, she was. Then I let Lorie go. She stood there glowering at me, massaging her wrist. "What kind of a trick was that?" she said.

I shrugged. "No trick. You said, trust no one. You reached for that gun as a test, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing. I passed the test. What more do you want?"

I couldn't tell yet if she was going to slap my face or smile at me. For a moment, she wasn't sure either. Finally, though, she grinned sheepishly and said, "I guess I deserved that. Shake, Moran?"

I shook hands with her. That is, I started to. She spun quickly and gracefully, leaning forward and down, using her shapely hip as a fulcrum. I pivoted over it and wound up on the floor, flat on my back. By the time I could climb to my feet, she had the gun in her hand again. She

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put it back in the drawer and said, "I thought I told you not to trust anyone! You didn't pass your second test, Moran. You flunked it."

I looked at Senator Demaret, who smiled. "If all these precautions really have to be taken," he said, "I guess Lorie is right."

Lorie nodded. "You're to accompany the Senator everywhere, Moran. No exceptions. You're to sleep right outside his bedroom door every night. When he's out in public, I want you to watch the secret service men most of all, because we can assume *they* can keep on the lookout for other people, but you know the old Latin saw about who will watch the watchers?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. You're to watch for trouble from unexpected sources. The secret service. The Senator's staff. Me. Before you're finished here, Moran, people are going to hate you. Even me, I guess. We can't help that, though. I want you to annoy me, to get in my hair. I want to know you're doing your job. I'll probably hate your guts and wish sometimes I could kick your teeth in, but we're paying you for that kind of protection. You understand?"

Again I said, "Yes."

"Now get out of here, will you? The Senator and I have some private matters to discuss."

I shook my head and plunked myself down in a big overstuffed chair and waited.

"Don't be insolent, Moran. I told you to go."

"Nope. I stay with the Senator."

Lorie looked at her uncle. They both nodded at the same time. "That's better, Moran," Lorie admitted. "This time you pass the test. I told you he's the man, didn't I, Uncle Theron?"

Just then the telephone rang in the outer office. There was a pause, then the intercom buzzed. Lorie picked up the phone, said her name into the mouthpiece and for the next several seconds sat there with a stunned look on her pretty face. Finally she returned the phone to its cradle and lit a cigaret. She looked at me without really seeing me and I could tell for the moment I had ceased to exist for her.

She looked at the Senator and said, "That was Captain Sanderston."

"The Vice Presidential secret service chief?"

"Yes." Lorie's face was very white. Her voice lacked

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expression. "The Vice President is dead."

"Dead?"

I was stunned too. I wondered if it was another job of inside assassination. Senator Demaret asked, "How did it happen? Who killed him?"

Instead of answering immediately, Lorie turned to me. "What I said before about all the Senator's close associates, Moran?"

I waited for her to go on. She took a deep breath and said: "It still goes. But there's someone else you have to add to the list. Senator Demaret himself."

The Senator and I exchanged glances. Lorie went on, "With absolutely no motive, the Vice President shot and killed himself half an hour ago."

In the wake of unexpected assassination, suicide swept around the world like a plague. Reports were spotty at first, but within three days at Washington, I began to get some of the picture. Six more congressmen, dead by their own hands. Eight high military leaders. Half a dozen governors. More strategically placed business officials. Twenyt-six MP's in London. Half of the Soviet Politburo according to reports filtering out through the Iron Curtain. There was absolutely no sharp upswing in the number of unimportant men, of common ordinary people who took their lives, no more than there had been an increase in the world-wide rate of murder.

But suddenly and for no known reason, influential people, important people, people who helped make the world go around, were either being assassinated or taking their own lives. It made completely no sense. The deaths were utterly without pattern—unless you considered the stature of the victims as part of some unknown pattern. It was so obvious, though, and so frightening, that at first people shied instinctively away from it.

I accompanied Senator Theron Demaret while he was being sworn in as Vice President. The usual publicity surrounding such events was dispensed with, at the request of the secret service and with presidential approval. The Chief Justice officiated in his own chambers at a grim, quiet ceremony.

Less than five minutes after it was over, Captain Lev Sanderston, the chief of the secret service squad attached to the Vice President, tried to kill Theron Demaret.

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At first, I didn't realize it. But I'd been told to watch for trouble from unexpected sources. I was standing at the new Vice President's left, with Sanderston half a dozen paces off on our right. He stood in a corner of the room and I guess everyone felt secure because he was there. Something, I don't know what, made me look at him. For the next few seconds, my actions were instinctive.

I hit Theron Demaret low, striking his knees with my shoulder and bowling him over. Lorie screamed. Aloof and austere in his robes, the Chief Justice looked amazed.

I didn't have time to explain. I hit Demaret and saw him go down and kept right on going over him. A gun roared, the slug gouging a chunk out of the plaster wall at head height right behind the Vice President. Then I had reached Captain Sanderston and this wasn't the time for niceties, courtesy of the Marquis of Whoozit or anyone else. I wripped my fingers around his right wrist and brought my knee up savagely into his groin. He collapsed without a sound and seconds later he was wretching on the floor of the Chief Justice's chambers.

When he could talk again he remembered nothing. It was as if he had been awakened suddenly from a dream and with every second that passed found the dream slipping away from him.

"Why did you try to kill Demaret?" I barked at him.

"Kill him? The Vice President? Yes . . . yes . . . but no, why should I try to do a thing like that? Are you crazy or something? I'm supposed to protect him. I. . . ."

And then they brought him his .38 Special, with one slug fired. They showed him the hole in the wall and no one had to tell him where Demaret was standing for the ceremony. "Kill him?" he mumbled again. "Yes . . . I. . . ." His eyes were dull, the muscles on either side of his jaw working furiously. "No, I don't, I can't . . . please . . . please."

He went into shock very quickly after that, as all the other assassins or would-be assassins had. He would be tried for attempted murder some time in the future if the medics adjudged him sane, but he remembered nothing. Obviously, he was a pawn.

Whose?

That's what no one knew. That's what everyone had to find out before all the world's

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governments came tumbling down for lack of leadership.

"You see?" Lorie told me on our way home.

"Yes."

"Everyone is suspect. Everyone."

The new Vice President nodded earnestly. "You have *carte blanche*, Moran. I mean that. You have full authority to do whatever you think necessary."

I shook my head. "It isn't easy, and you know it."

Lorie frowned. "Making excuses?"

"Lorie!" Demaret scolded her. "This man just saved my life."

"No," I said. "I'm not making excuses. I'm just pointing out the facts. By the very nature of his work a politician or a high-ranking military officer or a big business executive must come into contact, every day, with scores of people. His work requires it. If he neglected his work and went into hiding for safety's sake, that wouldn't solve anything, would it?"

"No," Lorie admitted.

"Well, that's all I mean. I'm sure the Vice President of the United States will want to conduct his affairs as usual, without a private detective telling him what to do. I'll be on hand. I'll do what I can, but. . . ." I shrugged eloquently enough under the circumstances.

Lorie reached across the seat of the car and squeezed my hand. "I understand," she said. "I know you'll do everything you can. And Craig?" It was the first time she'd used my first name. "Craig, I want you to know how grateful I am to you for what you did this afternoon."

Demaret agreed with her but added, "You deserve some of the thanks too, Lorie. If you hadn't talked me into the necessity of hiring a personal bodyguard because the secret service, like everyone else, could no longer be trusted...."

I grinned without humor. "Someone better watch me too," I pointed out. "Whatever's going on, there's no guarantee I'm immune."

"Don't worry," Lorie promised. "I'll be watching you like a hawk."

Five hours later, after a quiet dinner in the new Vice President's home in Georgetown, I'd seated myself outside his door comfortably with a couple of good books and was getting ready for the usual night's seige. The strain was beginning to show, I guess. Lately, I'd been sleeping only in snatches, when I got the opportunity. Benze-

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drine and strong coffee helped, but it wouldn't help indefinitely. Hell, it was just a job. I'd built up quite a rep as a private eye, but it was all always strictly business. So, what was I knocking myself out for? I wasn't sure until I had a visitor outside the Vice President's bedroom door.

Lorie—with her hair down. Gone was the severely tailored business suit and gone the haughty sophistication of the Senator—and now the Vice President's — administrative assistant. Lorie in dark satin pajamas and a filmy *peignoir* which covered them and the shadowy curves beneath them as substantially as a slight fog.

It was like Lorie. Unexpected. She didn't even say hello. She just sat down next to me on the chair, crossed her legs, smiled at me and said, "Why don't you get some sleep, Craig? I can stand watch for a while?"

I shook my head: "Thanks, but I can't trust anyone, remember?"

"I'll wake you if anything—"

"Uh-uh. That means you, too."

"And you Craig. You mustn't forget that. Either one of us. Everybody. Everybody's capable of it if Captain Sanderston is. The world is suddenly full of assassins and . . . Craig, I'm afraid. For the first time in my life, I'm really afraid. I've always been independent. I—I never thought anything like this . . . Craig, don't you see it? It's terrifying. There just isn't any rhyme or reason for it, except that all our leaders, all over the world are in danger. Craig, tell me. What's going to happen?"

She didn't really want an answer. She didn't expect one. Suddenly—and probably for the first time in her life—Loring Graham needed a shoulder to cry on. And then I knew why I'd been knocking myself out over this job. Reputation, hell. The importance of it, more hell. One word.

Lorie.

She looked into my eyes and I guess it was invitation enough. She came into my arms and now I knew why she always wore those severely tailored suits. She wanted to look hard. It was necessary that she looked hard. But she was soft and very feminine and her lips were warm and moist and trembling a little when I kissed her.

We sat for a long time there in the darkness talking about everything but what was real-

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ly on our minds. That could wait. Grimly, that was behind all our talk, but this one night he would keep it out of sight.

". . . so," Lorie was saying about an hour later, "I finished college and Uncle Theron figured he couldn't find a better Man Friday anyplace, although I don't know why, and here I am. Now, what about yourself?"

I began to tell her. A Captaincy in the Korean War. Not knowing what I wanted to do afterwards. Beating around à while. A bull session with some of the boys. Are there really things like private eyes in real life, someone wanted to know? It had been a dare. I'd told him there must be. We had a nominal bet. I put up my shingle and proved it to him. Before I knew it I was famous and in demand.

"That's about it," I finished.

"No attachments?"

"No attachments."

"I'm glad." Her eyes said she was delighted. Her lips....

There was a noise from the Vice President's room. It brought us back to reality in a hurry. I stood up from the chair and padded over to the bedroom door. "Just a minute," I told Lorie.

It was longer than a minute. The door opened while I was still a step away from it. The Vice President's bedroom was pitch dark. "Mr. Demaret?" I said.

Something moved in front of me. I craned my neck and peered in that direction but could see nothing.

"Look out!" Lorie cried suddenly.

It was not hard as blows over the head go, but it was hard enough. I reeled back away from the dark doorway, clutching at a table for support. I felt myself falling and tried to swing my hands down under me to cushion it, but they wouldn't obey me. I pitched forward on my face and lay there in that state half way between consciousness and unconsciousness. My mind was lucid but I couldn't move a muscle.

In the dim light, I saw Lorie grappling with someone. She was holding her own and had even wrestled the dark shape back against the wall when suddenly she screamed something and let go of him as if she realized with whom she was fighting for the first time. The shape pulled clear of her, sprinted across the room and out into the hallway. Lorie ran after it, but was back in seconds, a bewildered look on her face.

By then I had reached the

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groaning stage. Loris kneeled beside me and said, "Are you all right?"

"I will be," I mumbled. The inside of my mouth tasted like it was coated with ozone. "What happened?"

"I—I thought it was someone trying to kill Uncle Theron. I was fighting with him and I think I could have held him until you were able to help me, but then—then I saw him. It shouldn't have mattered, but I was so surprised. I'm sorry, Craig. I let him go."

"Who was it?" I said, sitting up and feeling the back of my head gingerly. There was a swelling the size of a grade A egg there, and the hair was matted with blood.

Lorie looked at me and said, "It was Uncle Theron himself! By the time I went outside to the hall, he was gone. Craig, what are we going to do? How can we find him? He looked strange, as if he didn't know what he was doing. Like he was in a trance or something. Craig, Craig, what can we do?"

Under the circumstances, that was a good question.

I'd made provisions, though. The first day I was on the job, I'd rigged up a wireless intercom system with all of Theron Demaret's staff members, including everyone from Lorie herself to the housemaid.

On my third try, I got Demaret's chauffeur. "Are you in the car?" I asked him over the wireless hookup.

His voice sounded crisp and metallic. "Yes, sir, Mr. Moran. Man, am I glad you called!"

"What's the matter?"

"It's the Vice President, sir. He's in the back of the car right now. He's acting like he's in a trance, sort of. You should excuse me if I'm wrong. He don't even know I'm on this here phone contraption."

"Never mind worrying about being wrong. Tell me what happened."

"I dunno for sure. He come to the garage, all excited. I got to take him somewhere, he said. Hop in, I tells him. I figure it's kind of funny, you not being along, sir. But when the Vice President says you do something, you do it."

"Go on," I said irritably.

"He says drive. I ask him where, but he don't say. He says he'll tell me later. I'm still driving?"

"Where are you now?"

"We're crossing the Memorial Bridge into Virginia."

"Tell him to drive right

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back despite what my uncle says," Lorie told me.

I ignored her. I said, "Keep on driving. Do whatever he says. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Lorie cried, "What's the matter with you, Craig? He may be trying to kill himself."

I shook my head and spoke into the intercom. "I'm getting into my own car," I told the chauffeur, whose name was Sam Lang. "You got that, Sam? You won't hear from me for a couple of minutes, but after that I'll keep in touch with you. Whatever you do, don't break contact. I'm going to follow you."

"Yes, sir. I got you. Man, am I relieved. I thought maybe I did the wrong thing or something but—"

"Humor him," I broke in. "This is very important. And don't tell him I'm following you." Before Sam could answer, I cut the connection—and faced a furious Lorie.

"Are you crazy?" she asked me. "He's not in his right mind. He doesn't know what he's doing. Assassination is one thing, but we have to worry about suicide too. Let me at that intercom, you fool."

"Use your head, Lorie. There are easier ways to commit suicide. Would you take a chauffeur along, even if you weren't in your right mind? Something's up, I don't know what. As long as Sam's with your uncle, he'll probably be safe. When we folow him, he'll even be safer. Come on."

Lorie was still doubtful. "I hope you know what you're doing," she said.

"I don't. I'm only guessing."

"Well, at least you said I could come along."

I grinned at her as we headed for our own bedrooms to dress. "You'd have come even if I told you not to, wouldn't you?"

"I'd have followed you in my own car," Lorie admitted.

I nodded. "That's what I thought. I'd rather keep my eye on you."

Five minutes later, Lorie met me at the garage. She knew it was urgent and she hadn't bothered to finish dressing in her room. She was slipping a sweater on over her bra as we climbed into my souped up Ford, but she took time out to kiss me as I kicked over the motor. "This is for being sensible," she said. "I think you're right, Craig. I wasn't thinking."

Moments later, we were streaking through the dark streets of Washington. If a

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cop tried to stop us for speeding, I think we would have run him down.

"Hello," I was calling over the intercom as I drove the car onto the Memorial Bridge. "Come in, Sam."

"I hear you, Mr. Moran," his voice squawked.

"Where are you?"

"Heading west." He gave me a route number. "Out toward the Blue Ridge Mountains."

"Did he tell you where you're going?"

"Not yet. He said take the Blue Ridge Highway."

"It's a long way to the mountains," I said.

"Not to the foothills. We're climbing already."

"I'm keeping the intercom wide open, Sam. If you get off the highway, let me know. I think it will be better if I stay out of sight. When you reach a town, let me know where you are. I want to know exactly how far behind we are at that time."

"Right, sir."

"How's he acting?"

"Still like he's dazed. You know, sir, I was at a show once where there was a hypnotist. He gave my cousin Charlie what they call a post-hypnotic suggestion, you know? That's how it is with the Vice President, begging your pardon."

I looked at Lorie, who had heard the squawking metallic sound of his voice. She bit her lip and said nothing. "If only we could get right behind him and keep him in sight," she said.

"I'd rather not. Maybe he'll realize he's being followed. Whatever's going to happen, let's just let it happen. Right?"

"Whatever you say, Craig." You could tell her own words amazed her. She wasn't used to taking orders from anyone, but she found herself listening to me.

After that, we were climbing steadily into the foothills. A heavy rain began to fall, sweeping against the windshield in blinding sheets. Lorie began to tremble with the sudden cold and I snapped on the heater switch. Judging from what he told me about roadsigns and small towns along the way, Sam Lang was about five miles ahead of us on the highway. I cut the distance down to less than two miles.

"Hey, Mr. Moran!" Sam suddenly called over the intercom.

"What is it?"

"He wants I should stop."

"Don't," I said. "Make ex-

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cuses, anything, until we get there."

"He wants to get out right here."

"Slow down. Humor him. But don't stop the car. Don't let him out."

"Hey, Mr. Moran. . . ." The voice trailed off.

"Hello!" I shouted. "Hello. Sam!"

At first there was nothing, but then I heard the screeching sound of wet brakes being applied suddenly. This was followed by a yell. Sam Lang, I thought. It hadn't sounded like Theron Demaret.

"Hello!" I cried again. "Sam, can you hear me?"

There was a sudden explosive sound of metal colliding with metal, another hoarse shout, and then nothing. Nothing at all.

"Faster!" Lorie pleaded. "Hurry, Craig. Hurry."

This souped up Pontiac of mine can do a hundred thirty on the straightaway. We reached Sam's car in not much more than a minute flat, including the time it took us to stop.

The Caddy had gone off the road to avoid a head-on collision with a big semi-trailer. The van of the truck had sideswiped it, though, and the Caddy was over on its side on the shoulder of the road.

I got out into the rain with Lorie and we ran over to the Caddy. Sam Lang was standing near the front fender, arguing with the truck driver. Sam had a nasty gash on his forehead, but looked all right otherwise.

"Them rich bastards," the truck driver was complaining. "I don't blame you, pal. They tell you to go faster, you got to go faster. Rain or nothing like that matters to them, huh?"

"I'll handle this," I told Sam while Lorie called him over to the back seat of the Caddy, which was on its side with the under-carriage facing the highway.

"Who the hell are you?" the truck driver asked me belligerently.

"It doesn't matter who I am. The man who owns this car is the Vice President of the United States."

The driver didn't have time to look impressed. Lorie came rushing over and said, "Craig, he's gone. He's completely disappeared."

The rain was falling harder now, driving in on a cold November wind from the western hills. Distantly, I heard the wail of a siren and wondered without really caring how the police had heard of the accident so soon.

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"What do you mean, disappeared?" I asked Lorie.

"He's not in the car, Craig."

I ran over to the up-ended Caddy with her. I chinned myself up over the under-carriage and looked inside. The car was empty. I ran back to the truck driver, who was simmering down now. He had changed his tune from damned millionaires to damned politicians. I borrowed a three-battery flashlight from him and returned to the car, swinging the beam of the light in a wide swath around the Caddy until I found what I was looking for.

"There," I said. "He went that way." I pointed out the footprints in the soft mud on the shoulder of the road. They made an unsteady trail toward the scrub pine which faded off away from the highway into the gloom of the foothills.

Sam Lang called, "Mr. Moran, sir? I'm sorry. I didn't want it to happen. I tried my best to . . ."

"That's all right," I said.

"No, you don't understand. I figure something's wrong with him. I try to do like you say."

"Of course," I said irritably. Sam was tugging at the sleeve of my jacket. He would not let me go until I heard the whole story.

"See, I slow the car down. All of a sudden, he comes up out of that trance. In the rear-view mirror, his eyes look crazy, you should excuse me, sir, him being the Vice President and all. I'm driving and trying to see through the rain. I can't stop him. He comes climbing over the back seat of the car. He hollers I should stop. We start struggling. He's the Vice President, I says to myself." Sam was almost in tears. "I can't fight with him. But he's crazy, kind of. He wrestles the wheel away from me. I see this here truck coming. Blammo!" Sam finished. It was the only laconic part of his story.

I pulled Sam aside and said, "Listen. We can't have publicity like this. The truck driver wasn't listening to you. He's still mad and plenty confused. Tell the police you were out alone for a joyride. Tell them you were drinking. Tell them anything you want. But don't tell them you were driving with the Vice President. He wasn't here with you, understand? If you get into any trouble with the police, we'll straighten it out for you. That's important, Sam. You understand?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Moran," said

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Sam, and walked over to the truck driver. He said, "What's the matter, friend, you been drinking or something? Here I am, all alone in this car, and you start frothing at the mouth about somebody in the back seat. You been drinking or something?"

"What?" roared the truck driver. "You just now said it was the Vice President of the United States—"

"Oh, no," Sam insisted. "You must have been hearing things. Where would the Vice President go at this hour of the night?"

I grinned and turned away, motioning to Lorie. "Stay with Sam," I told her. "He may need your help."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm going with you."

"You'll do more good if you stay with Sam."

"I won't argue with you, Craig Moran. I'm going with you."

I shrugged. We couldn't waste any more time. The police siren was very near now. I could see the highway prowl car's red blinker light winking on and off down the road. If we remained here arguing even another few seconds, the police might detain us indefinitely. As it was, they would probably impound my own car and try to figure out what I was doing with a wireless setup in it. But I figured the office of the Vice President could straighten that out when the time came.

Hand in hand with Lorie, I left the road and set off through the scrub pine toward the hills. It was very rough going.

"Can you put on the light now?" Lorie asked me ten minutes later.

We were now out of earshot of the police. We could see headlights on the highway, but they seemed far away. I had to chance the flashlight, for we'd started out following Theron Demaret's footprints but couldn't be sure we were still on them. I stooped and held the light close to the ground and switched it on.

"I don't see anything," Lorie said.

I swung the light to the left. Scrub pine and muddy rivulets streaming down the hillside. No footprints.

"Craig," Lorie said. "Craig, if we've lost the trail—" Her voice left the sentence unfinished. Her fingers tightened on mine.

I cursed because we couldn't hold the light up high and have a good look around. I swung its beam slowly to the

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right and Lorie almost shouted for joy.

"There it is!" she cried.

The footprints, half an inch deep in the thick mud, were unmistakable. I wondered how long it would take for the mud to ooze back in and cover them. Not long, I decided. We couldn't be more than a few minutes—several hundred yards, perhaps—behind Theron Demaret. Suddenly, I wished I had a weapon with me. I don't know why, but the wish formed in my mind. Call it intuition or call it anything you want, but I thought that before tonight was over or certainly before the sun was very high in the eastern sky, we would need a gun.

"What time is it?" I asked Lorie as we followed the footprints. I was walking in a half-crouch, keeping the flashlight close to the ground so its light wouldn't be seen very far.

"Three-fifteen," Lorie said. "Do you think we can overtake him?"

"No. He's walking in a straight line, as if he knows where he's going. We have to follow the footprints."

Craig, what could he possibly want out here?"

"I don't know," I said grimly.

"Do you think there's a connection between this and the assassinations?" Lorie paused and then added, "And the suicides?"

"There has to be. That's the only way it makes sense."

"But what—what could it be?"

I shrugged, then realized the gesture was lost in the darkness. I said something meant to be reassuring, but I didn't feel confident at all. My mind ran the gamut from plain and simple insanity to a clandestine meeting with enemy agents. Nothing made sense. Up ahead of us somewhere in the dark hills there was an answer, but it was nothing I could think of now.

The way was steeper now, the ground more rugged and rocky. Once when I looked back I could see the highway, a slender silvery string far below us, gleaming with rain and the neon glow of the motels and roadside rests. Then we breasted a small hummock of ground and descended into a gully beyond it. We could no longer see the highway. The police, if they chanced to look this way, would not be able to see us. I straightened my stiff muscles and held the flashlight waist-high and we moved very much more quickly after that.

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I was about to congratulate myself for the speed we were making when Lorie screamed.

The next moment, she was on hands and knees looking at something. I brought the flashlight beam down, but Lorie came up against me trembling and groaned, "I can't. I can't look. . . ."

I squatted and played the light on the ground in front of her. A man was there on the muddy earth. Like Lorie's, my first thought was of Theron Demaret, but this man was dressed in overalls and a lumberjacket. I thrust my hand inside his jacket and felt no heartbeat. His face was a mass of charred flesh, the features completely gone.

"It's not. . . ." Lorie began. "It isn't. . . ."

"No. I never saw this man before. He's a farmer, by the way he's dressed."

"He's dead?"

"Yes. His head is terribly burned."

"What could have done it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I frowned and added, "Your uncle came this way. Your uncle probably saw him here, but went right on."

"You don't think Uncle Theron killed this man?"

"How? No, I don't think Demaret murdered him. I think Demaret saw him, ignored him and went on."

"Ignored *him*?"

"Remember what Sam said, about post-hypnotic suggestion? It's something like that, I think. Theron Demaret does not know what he's doing. Something's drawing him on, something he wants to reach. Something, I don't know what."

"We ought to report—this—to the police, Craig."

"No," I said. "We don't have the time. The rain's stopping. We might never be able to find your uncle's trail again."

It was only drizzling now. I swung the flashlight ahead of us and its beam revealed a weathered split-rail fence. Beyond it, the ground leveled off very quickly. Theron Demaret's footprints went up to the fence and continued on the other side.

"A farm," I told Lorie. I gestured behind us. "This poor guy probably owned it."

"But what—why—?"

"Let's find out," I suggested, and helped Lorie over the fence. Once on the other side, we broke into a trot across the level ground. A brisk cold wind whipped across the land. Overhead, the clouds scudded quickly away, revealing a crescent of moon and patches

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of stars. The air was still wet and laden, but we'd had all the rain we would have this night.

Something loomed in the darkness. A farmhouse, large, dark, old. I tripped over something and fell heavily as we approached the house. Somewhere, a dog barked furiously.

A woman's voice called through the night: "Is that you, Seth? What kept you all night?"

"Oh, God," Lorie moaned. "It must be his wife, that poor man's wife."

"Ignore her," I whispered savagely. "It won't help her any, finding her husband now instead of tomorrow morning. We can't stop."

"Seth? Answer me. I heard you out there, Seth. I wanted to tell you, there were those funny noises again in the east pasture. Seth? Seth, answer me!" Suddenly, the woman's voice sounded alarmed, as if she had a premonition of tragedy.

I led Lorie by the hand and skirted the gardened half acre in front of the farmhouse. The woman, stocky and middle-aged, appeared in a doorway, a wind-whipped shawl draped across her shoulders. "Seth! Answer me, Seth."

Just then a loud twittering sound was borne to us on the wind.

"There it is," the woman called. "Is that why you're not answering me, Seth? Are you going to see what it is?"

Lorie and I forgot all about the woman. I had never heard anything like that sound before. It was a giant bird sound, a twittering. It shouldn't have been frightening, but it was the most frightening thing I'd ever heard. It made the hackles rise on the back of my neck. I'd read a lot about them, those hackles, but I never thought it really happened, although I've been in some mighty close calls. It happened now, though. Lorie took two steps in the direction of the sound, which was repeated at intervals like a signal, and stopped.

"I can't," she said. "I want to go on with you. I can't."

"The noise?"

"Craig, I never knew such a sound could exist. I don't know why it makes me afraid, but I've never felt fear like t h i s b e f o r e in my life. Craig. . . ."

"Go back to the farmhouse," I suggested. "Spend the night with that woman. She'll need someone if she finds out what happened to her husband."

"She won't find out until it's

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light. I want to go with you, Craig. I'll be all right. I. . . ." And suddenly, she was in my arms. She came against me, trembling and afraid. I held her a long time and whispered things meant to be comforting against her hair and I ended up by saying I was in love with her.

"Craig," she sighed. "Craig, Craig—I—whatever happens I want you to know I'm in love with you too. Craig, whatever it is, we can lick it together, can't we, can't we?"

"We can try," was all I said, and together we walked out across the dark farmland toward the twittering sound.

"It's louder now," Lorie said. Her hand was cold and very small in mine, the fingers clutching and unclutching nervously.

The sound was very much louder. The eastern sky was pink-tinted now. And part of the horizon was obscured by something large and round and very black.

"Craig, my God, what is it?"

It was as big around as a house and black as anthracite. There were portholes in its sides and a fringe of silver tubes at its bottom. There was a dull red glow beneath the silver tubes, as if something tremendously hot — an exhaust?—slag?—had recently been there.

"There's only one thing it can possibly be," I said. My voice sounded unreal as I spoke the words which would explain what this thing was even though my mind could not yet accept the explanation. "It's a spaceship."

A spaceship, I thought. I let the thought run through my mind. I forced myself to think the word, spaceship, over and over again. It wasn't anything like the way you read it would be. No envoys from the United Nations to greet it, no great military forces ringing it with steel and TNT, no fanfare, no publicity, no speeches, no scientists from the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies to converse with whatever was inside the craft from another world, nothing like what you read in all the magazines and Sunday supplements and saw in all the movies.

The twittering sound came again, as loud as thunder. Somehow, that sound was the embodiment of evil, although we could not understand it and might never learn the language or the words spoken. Somehow, without knowing how I knew, I recognized that sound for evil. Without

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motivation, without reason, as surely evil as they say God and the Prince of Peace are good. . . .

The black side of the spaceship facings began to glow. It became translucent, transparent, was gone. Theron Demaret stood there, beckoning to us.

"Lorie," he called in a strange voice. "Moran. Come inside. There's so much to tell you."

Lorie held back. "Craig, I don't want to go in there. It's —it's evil."

"You can feel it too?"

"Yes. It isn't rational. I can't explain it. It's as if—as if an aura of pure evil somehow emanated from that ship. I don't know. . . ."

"Come on," Theron Demaret called us.

I shrugged. "We came out here to find him," I said. "We found him. We'll have to go in there with him, Lorie. Now."

And together, not daring to leave go of one another's hands, we entered the spaceship.

Call them birds, because the semantics of our language cannot approximate their form any closer. They were birds, then, as big as men. Bipeds, for they walked upright on two legs. Strutted, rather, with huge-muscled necks, feather-fringed, supporting the great beaked heads, a single enormous eye in each head above the beak, another fringe of feathers, gleaming as if powdered with gold dust, like a tiara above the single eye. So, I call them birds because that's the closest our language can come.

They were not twittering now. They were ignoring us entirely. There were two of them, and they seemed indifferent to us. Theron Demaret wasn't, though. Enthusiastically, he said, "You're just in time to see the dawning of a new era."

"That's interesting," I said. As yet, I was hardly listening. I was looking around trying to take everything in, the impossibly complex control board, the floor black but more smoothly polished than the glass of a telescope mirror, the hammocks which the bird-things probably used when they took their spaceship up against the force of a planet's gravity. Mostly, I was looking for some sign of the control they had over Theron Demaret's mind. The way he talked, you could tell they were controlling him. He was hardly more than a puppet and looking at him, I did-

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n't think he knew it. But there was no physical sign of the control they held over him. Sam was right, I decided. It was something mental, like hypnotism. You could examine him with every instrument known to clinical psychologists without finding a trace of it.

"Interesting?" Demaret said. "You merely call it interesting? Humanity is about to take a step forward in the direction of the stars, and all you can say is interesting!"

"A step forward?" I was stalling for time. I still didn't know what to do. I didn't know how much time I had, for the bird-things were looking at us now with their enormous, un-blinking eyes. "What kind of step forward?"

"We are being offered the knowledge of a culture older and wiser than ours. These two creatures are here to give us all the knowledge they possess. Of course, since such revolutionary developments are always greeted with scorn and suspicion, it was necessary that certain political cautions be taken."

"Like killing hundreds of the world's leaders," Lorie said coldly. As I did, she realized she was not addressing her uncle, but merely her uncle's body. With something else in possession of the mind.

"Yes," Theron Demaret said. "You mean the assassinations and the suicides, of course. It was regrettable, but necessary. We have killed those people who seemed capable of offering the most resistance. The path of progress now lies open. Certain changes in forms of government will be made in order to initiate that progress swiftly, and for that a single world leader in human form is needed." His voice took on a more confidential tone. "Tomorrow, the President of the United States is going to kill himself. It has all been arranged. It's a magnificent form of thought control, don't you think?

"I am going to take over. I am going to lead the world on the path to true glory." He sounded like a soap-box orator. I almost expected to see him frothing at the mouth. It wasn't that he believed in all this. He was beyond thinking or believing. He was merely a tool now.

"There will naturally be malcontents," he went on. "That is to be expected. We are prepared for them. We can either destroy them as the political trouble-makers have been destroyed—or in a swift-

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er way, as the farmer who owned this land was destroyed. Either way, we cannot be stopped. That is important. That is something you must know as truth."

"He's crazy," Lorie whispered to me. "He's speaking like a madman."

"No, not crazy. Call it possessed," I whispered. Aloud, I said, "Where are your — friends from?"

Demaret was silent for a few seconds, as if letting the information flow into his mind. Finally, he said, "Their star is beyond the range of our most powerful telescopes. We've never heard of it. Alone, we'd never discover it, for it lies halfway across the galaxy."

"Then they came here by accident?" I wanted to know.

"Quite by accident. It was not a planned expedition. Something happened to their spaceship in subspace. They were heading for a star on the other side of the Saggitarian Swarm. The accident could not be repeated in a thousand generations."

I looked at Lorie. For some reason, I smiled. There was still a chance, I tried to tell her with my eyes. Whatever power they had, there was still a chance because there were only two of them. If we could somehow destroy them now, before they had a chance to contact their home planet, before they could tell their fellows there of this ripe planet, this Earth halfway across the galaxy, ready for plundering. . . .

"And they haven't notified their home planet?" I demanded. I tried to sound casual, but I waited tensely for Theron Demaret's answer.

There was a pause. Then: "No, of course not. No communication is possible over such vast distances, scores of thousands of parsecs, Craig Moran. For example, if this expedition never returned, their home planet would never learn of Earth's existence. But of course, they will return."

Again I looked at Lorie. She must have known what I had in mind. She shuddered but squared her shoulders and waited for me to take the lead.

Before I could say anything or do anything, one of the bird-things twittered. Demaret blinked quickly, repeatedly, as if he couldn't believe the command which had been given to him. He walked in mechanical, jerky steps to the control board of the spaceship. He lifted something off the board and I didn't have to

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look twice to realize it was a weapon. "I'm sorry," he said matter-of-factly. "I forgot to tell you they can read minds. They want me to kill you."

And he advanced toward Lorie and me with the weapon. I remembered the dead farmer's horribly scorched face. I got in front of Lorie.

My plan had been simple. Kill them before they could reveal the existence of Earth to their home planet across the infinite gulf of space. Kill them, and instantly stop the waves of assassination and suicide which had swept the planet. Kill them and hope that some time in the unforseeable future, when next contact was made between our races, we would be ready for them.

But now, instead, they were going to kill us.

Demaret stopped walking three paces in front of us. The control cabin of the spaceship was a spherical room, thirty yards across. Lorie and I stood near one of the curving walls, with our backs to it. The bird-things had left our death in Demaret's hands. They were watching impassively, somehow certain of success.

I waited until I saw Theron Demaret's finger whiten on what passed for a trigger on the weapon. I hurled myself at him, knowing it was futile, knowing I could count the life left to me in seconds. The weapon purred as I hit Demaret with my shoulder, knocking the wind from him. Something roared over my head, Lorie screamed, but the searing heat had missed both of us. I had a quick glimpse of one section of the spaceship wall glowing a fierce red behind us. I wondered if the bird-things had any more weapons. I didn't have time to worry about it, because Demaret was fighting with wild, unexpected strength. He was small and not very muscular, but the bird-things somehow poured strength into his body. Probably, with their mind control, they could have even given strength like that to a woman.

We rolled over and over on the cabin floor. When the bird-things didn't interfere, I realized that they were probably frail physically. They could control Demaret and make him use every ounce of strength his body possessed, in the way that a Yogi can. But they would not enter the fight themselves unless their lives depended on it. Did it also mean they had only the one weapon which Demaret

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still held in his hand? I didn't know. I think I prayed. . . .

He was straddling me now and I could not get out from under because I was too busy trying to keep the heat weapon pointed away from me. All at once, something stirred in my mind. I don't know what. It was like—like a jammed trigger. The aliens, I thought. The bird-things. Trying to get possession of my brain. I didn't fight it. I had to concentrate all my efforts on Theron Demaret.

They couldn't reach me!

Apparently only some peoples' minds could be captured by them. Something to do with the genetic makeup, perhaps. I don't know. But they could not control me.

Demaret's face was over me, leering. I brought my elbow up against his throat, jarred it against his Adam's Apple. He gagged and rolled off me, clutching at his neck, dropping the heat weapon. "Get it!" I yelled at Lorie. "Pick it up. . . ."

I stood up and kicked Demaret in the face while he was still trying to regain his feet. I felt sorry for him then. I hoped I wasn't ruining his appearance permanently, because he was blameless. If the aliens were destroyed, Theron Demaret would be normal again. But there was no time to wonder. I had to put him out of action in a hurry.

He flipped over on his back. There was blood on his jaw and two teeth were hanging by fleshy threads. He moaned and lay still.

I walked, in a dream, to the first alien. At the last moment, it tried to flutter away from me, very much like a bird. I grabbed its muscular-looking neck. The thin, pipestem legs drummed the floor. I squeezed the neck and felt vestigal wings beat futilely against my face, small wings, baby wings, useless wings. I shook the creature and closed my fingers on its throat and kept them closed there until I knew it was dead. I let it fall to the floor and turned toward the other alien.

And Lorie said: "Stand still or I'll kill you."

I faced her. Her eyes had gone cold, like Demaret's. The muscles of her face were set rigidly. She held the heat weapon in her hand and was pointing it at me. "If you touch it," she said, gesturing to the alien, "you'll die."

I looked at her. Love, I thought. We were in love with each other. But what did love matter now, with the alien in

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control of her body, giving her unswerving purpose and the strength not of a woman but of a madman.

If she killed me, Earth was doomed. If somehow I could kill her and kill the alien, Earth was saved but my life was empty.

"Lorie," I said, inching toward her. "Lorie, listen. Lorie, try to understand. . . ."

Aloof, impassive, sure of its power, the remaining alien watched us. Theron Demaret was still on the floor, unconscious. Outside through the portholes, full daylight was upon the land. This might be the last free day Earth would ever know.

"Stop coming toward me!" Lorie cried. "Stand perfectly still. Or. . . ."

"Or what? I said, still advancing. "You'd kill me anyway, wouldn't you? You don't want to. I can see you fighting with yourself. You don't want to obey. The alien's making you. I love you, Lorie. I love you. . . ."

Almost, it worked. Lorie did not fire the heat weapon. Instead, all at once, she hurled it at me. I ducked, diving quickly for the floor, but the heavy metal weapon struck my forehead, dazing me. I reeled, staggered toward Lorie. My arms hung limply at my sides. I couldn't move them. I was on my feet but only half-conscious.

Lorie picked up something else, a metal rod. She brought it down with both hands toward my head. If it hit, everything was finished. I lunged aside, caught the rod on my right shoulder. I felt it down to my toes and back again, like a shock wave. I clenched my left fist and struck Lorie across the jaw with it. At first I did not think it was hard enough. I was just regaining the power of my left arm. But Lorie leaned forward toward me and slumped against my arms. I let her fall gently to the floor.

Then I dove for the remaining alien. Its twittering was choked off as my hands closed on the throat. It tried again to find my mind, but failed.

Moments later, it was dead.

I dragged Theron Demaret outside and a hundred yards from the spaceship. I went back for Lorie, who was just regaining consciousness. At first she beat her small fists against my chest, with what was left of the post-hypnotic suggestion, but then she began to cry and let me carry her outside. I left her with Theron Demaret. I said soothing things to her, but it was-

(Concluded on page 130)

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BY THE READERS

Dear Howard:

As I looked through the December issue of *Fantastic* I notice that you're bringing back the letter section, both of that magazine and *Amazing Stories*. Some of the best news I've heard in a long time. About a year ago I came across about 100 pulps and I started to read them. Previous to that I had confined myself to the small size S-F. With the 100 pulps, I had quite a few Amazings and constantly looked forward to the letters.

A question: on page 92 you have a story, "The Vicar of Skeleton Cove", credited to Ivar Jorgensen. You feature this story on the cover and credited it to Lawrence Chandler. I was always a little suspicious of Ivar's name. Could Chandler be his real name?

A criticism on the cover. It seems to me that the S-F magazines today are going from one extreme to the other. If it's not half-nude girls and BEM's, it's dull uninteresting material. At least that's my opinion of your December cover. A few of the magazines have truly good covers.

No comment on the stories. Don't like to do that unless the story is truly exceptional. How about something by Bradbury, Matheson, etc.

If this letter should ever see the light of day, I'd enjoy corresponding with some fans. I have quite a collection of

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S-F (about 500-600 pieces)—some dating back to the late 1920's.

Roget Smyth
712 West 176th St.
New York 33, N. Y.

● *Whether or not the readers' section stays, Roget, will depend on the readers themselves. . . . The question on the Chandler-Jorgensen by-line has been explained in answering a previous letter. . . . You'll have no more reason to dislike our covers; they are now the best on the stands.—Ed.*

Dear sir:

I am an old hand at reading S-F, having started in 1935. In recent years I have taken strongly to an interest in old-time sailing ships. I prefer the galleon period. I collect plans, and occasionally make models, spending six weeks on one. I can guess you feel that I am ready to criticize "The Vicar of Skeleton Cove." I *am* ready to criticize; are you ready to take it?

In the time of the galleons, no schooners existed, no ship would be called "Lord of the Indies", and no vicar would be wearing a black suit and reversed collar for over 100 years. (I am no expert on period clothing, but in galleon times men wore a collar of ruffles, as did the women.)

Nor would Billy Swain be surprised by a gun in Nathan's hand. They may not have had pistols in his day, but smaller arms were used, not just cannon. Jorgensen is not aware of this. Swain says, "Not a cannon in sight", in reference to firearms, as if he never heard of handarms.

Whoever illustrated this story drew an obvious copy of a well-known Hollywood actor who has played many such parts before (pirate captain). This is all right . . . only he is dressed in 18th Century clothing—and story setting is 16th Century.

Your cover artist did all right. He drew no schooner for the vicar, but the stern of a galleon. I risk saying it is a Dutch galleon, not English as we might expect, but then ships changed hands often then, as they do yet.

Can I have artist Ralph Castenir's address? I wish to know what source-material he used in choosing this galleon stern

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for his motif in painting your cover. This might lead me to a good plan of her.

Bob Barnett
1107 Lyon St.
Carthage, Mo.

● *We showed Jorgensen this letter, Bob, and asked him to comment. He mumbled something about thinking "he'd better do research after this" and walked out. We haven't seen him since! . . . Seriously, we do thank you for the time and trouble you've given to write us on the subject. . . . Write to Ralph Castenir in care of Fantastic, Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 366 Madison Avenue, N. Y., N. Y.—Ed.*

The Editor:

I enjoy most of the stories in your magazine, but did not like "Water Cure" by John Toland in the December issue.

Too many authors have tried to copy the incomparable style of the late Thorne Smith, author of "Topper", with a resulting flop.

A reader will accept a risque story if it is well written. If not well written it becomes merely lewd and in bad taste. You don't have to accept this kind of manuscript to sell an otherwise good magazine. The works of really great masters of mystery and fantasy in the past are still good reading today and this is proof of their greatness.

My apologies to Mr. Toland.

Marie Nyeholt
8823 E. Virginia Ave.
Pico, California

● *What constitutes lewdness and bad taste is as debatable as what constitutes good art, literature and politics. Your editors thought "Water Cure" hilarious, fast-moving and entertaining. Most readers saw it pretty much the same way. Who is wrong—if anybody?—Ed.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

That's the way I feel!

I have both begonias *and* bombs for you.

But before I get into that, I'd like to say something about

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the cover. On it, printed in red, is: "The Eye and I." By C. H. Thames. Have you noticed that by holding the magazine in the right light and looking at the words, they appear to move or vibrate? It may be far-fetched, but this *could* be the first of many developments which may one day bring us moving illustrations, couldn't it?

Anyway, on to the fuses and flowers. The cobalt and compliments concern *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. The bouquet goes to *Fantastic*. I personally consider *F* one of the better s-f mags on the stands today. The blast goes to *A*. Do you *really* consider it the "World's Leading Science Fiction Magazine"? If you do, why? It can't be because of the stories you print in it, can it? Is there any other reason? In my opinion, *A* seems to be retrogressing, while *F* is progressing. *A* is becoming a throwback to the days of space opera.

Maybe along with the new features a new personality and quality will be injected into the pages of *A*. I'll buy the next issue—because I'm not going to condemn anything without trying it—but if I don't like it, it will be the last time I buy it. If I *do* like it, the next letter I write to you may be all begonias.

If any other fans want to disagree with my opinion of *A*, and I suspect they will, they can do it for the price of a three-cent stamp—or they might agree with me.

Ronald E. Frazier
450 42nd Street, Richmond 9, Calif.

● *The phenomenon of "vibrating" cover copy comes from the color plates being slightly off register—actually a flaw instead of a virtue. After reading your comment, we got out a copy and followed your directions—and darned if there wasn't an illusion of movement! . . . Yes, your editor considers* Amazing Stories *the world's leader in its field. Why? Because every story in it was one he liked personally; because its covers nowadays are the best in the business—both as paintings and from the standpoint of reproduction; because the interior artwork is, with rare exception, unsurpassed; because in layouts, story blurbs, captions, etc., its standards are high; and because it now has an individuality and character of its own. The same goes for* Fantastic. *It is the editor's hope that the general reader's views on the subject will coincide with his*

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own; but it is only a hope until the line on the sales chart shows a steady and lasting rise.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I'm back again. First I want to thank you for printing my letter in the April issue of *Fantastic.*

Now to other things. The cover was one of the best pieces of art I've seen in a long, long time. Excellent.

All the stories were good with "The Big Bluff" getting my vote as the best. I liked "Killer in the Crib"—it was very enjoyable. "The Still Waters," by Hall, was well-written and had feeling in it. The other tales were average.

I thought the illustration by Evans to be very good. I hope you will have more of his art in future issues. He has long been one of my favorite artists. I also like Finlay, whose style is quite different and quite wonderful.

I would like to have some pen pals. Come on you S-F fans, drop me a line. I'm seventeen and I've been reading S-F for almost a year.

I'm looking forward to the changes coming up in the next issue.

Dan Adkins
General Delivery, East Liverpool, Ohio

● *Not much in your letter to comment on, Dan, but your letters are always welcome.*—ED.

Mr. Browne:

I am in agreement with Mr. Sharrock's letter in your February issue of *Fantastic.* There is an over-abundance of science fiction on the newsstands, with too few containing stories in the Lovecraft, M. R. James and Blackwood styles. In your first few issues of *Fantastic* there were some fine horror stories, which I would like to see reprinted if possible. If you must print S-F, how about digging up some of C. L. Moore's "Northwest Smith" tales. At any rate please keep the fantasy in *Fantastic.*

Elwood A. Renkel, Jr.
458 So. Market St., Selinsgrove, Penn.

● *No reprints, Elwood. Sorry, but the good ones appear so*

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often in hard- and soft-cover books that the bulk of our readership simply wouldn't stand for it. . . . And let's look at the light where fantasy is concerned: too few readers like the genre to support a magazine devoted solely to it.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have been reading *Fantastic* (FA) for about four years but this is my first time to write. I have enjoyed most of the stories. Some, of course, have stunk to say the least, but the majority were fine.

In the February issue, "Cross Index," "Love That Potion" and "While My True Love Waits" were tops. The rest were good to ugh.

I would like to obtain the copies of FA and AS that had the following stories: "Star Kings," "Man From Yesterday," "So Shall Ye Reap," and "Whom the Gods Would Slay." If anyone has these copies for sale, please write.

I have a few pocket books and sf magazines for sale.

Larry Rose (W9ALO)
120 South Reader, Mounds, Illinois

● *We'll make sure there's more "good" than "ugh," Larry.* —ED.

Dear Howard:

After spending most of the night reading the April issue of *Fantastic,* I will jot down a few remarks for your edification on the subject.

First off, I was surprised to find the sub-masthead "Science-Fiction" tacked on this issue. The last *Amazing* led me to believe it wouldn't appear until the one dated June. But it is all to the good. I much prefer stf to fantasy. This, plus the news that a letter column is to be extended into a REAL column makes me think that maybe *Fantastic* Science-Fiction is on the road to taking the place of the old *Fantastic Adventures.*

Tops in stories this time were taken by "Silent Night," "The Still Waters," and "The Big Bluff." In that order. Your lineup of authors is looking brighter with each issue. Don't overlook Paul Fairman and Ivar Jorgensen. This was the first time in many issues their names were missing. They may turn out a

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lot of copy, but I can't think of one story of theirs I haven't liked.

The inside illustrations are definitely improving over the past few issues. Finlay has always been my favorite and his work this time is excellent. I wouldn't pass up the one for "Still Waters" by Evans, however. Cover this time wasn't as good as it was the past two. Can't you give us some of the type that have been on *Amazing?* They are turning out to be the best in the field.

There is a lot of talk about keeping the stories in *Fantastic* short. I, myself, would like to see some of the longer type you once featured in *Fantastic Adventures*. I suppose the problem is in the space you have in the magazine. Couldn't you decrease the size of the print you use and put the lines a little closer together? This would allow for more wordage and you could then use some of the longer stories. It is done successfully in other magazines is why I suggest it.

Since *Amazing* is bringing back the fanzine reviews and book reviews, how about *Fantastic* bringing back the short features. They can be done in a pocket-size magazine; one of your competitors uses them each issue.

And, but not of least importance by a long shot, bring back in both magazines your editorial. It doesn't have to be long, but please put it in.

Guy E. Terwilleger
1412 Albright St., Boise, Idaho

● *All right, Guy, point by point: The words "Science-Fiction" on* Fantastic *is not part of the magazine's title; it is merely an explanatory line on what kind of material the magazine carries. . . . Fairman* and *Jorgensen will continue to be well represented in our two science-fiction publications; we, too, think they're tremendous writers. . . . You will find more and more examples of straight science-fiction artwork as covers of* Fantastic. . . . *Reducing type size and closing the lines would make the book much harder on the eyes and consequently less enjoyable to read. . . . We're giving a lot of thought to the return of short features to these pages. . . . There will be a column by the editor in both our magazines from now on—turn to page 4 in this issue for the first one. Let's hear from you again . . . and again.*—ED.

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Dear Mr. Browne:

"The Big Bluff" was engrossing. I thoroughly enjoyed it, more than any other *Fantastic* story yet. I enjoyed the description of the Chavorians. Sorta like the good cover on the copy of Captain Future illustrating "The Quest Beyond the Stars."

Fantastic can never equal *Amazing*, I believe. It never could. *Amazing* has the best stories. Jorgensen's "Blessed are the Murderous," one of the best, classified him as the Writer of the Year, in my mind.

James W. Ayers
609 First St., Attalla, Alabama

● *With less and less straight fantasy appearing in the pages of* Fantastic, *it and* Amazing *will feature the same type of story: solid science fiction, by the best writers we can get. Watch and see.*—ED.

Dear H. B.

A lot of water has run over the banks here in Kansas City since I first started reading *Fantastic*. In those days it was *Fantastic Adventures*, and despite the ragged edges and the (in those days) cumbersome size, it ran some of the best stories I've ever read in the science-fantasy field. Stories like "The Man From Yesterday" (I've forgotten who wrote that one) and "Excaliber and the Atom," by Ted Sturgeon, and "Forgotten Worlds," by William Brengle. These were all very long yarns, and I know it's too much to hope for more like them. Too bad.

I think stories of bygone ages are my favorites. Readers may complain that such fiction is strictly fantasy; but after all gathering information about our ancient ancestors is one of today's scientific achievements, which is where the "science" comes in. So how about some stories about Cro-magnon Man and ancient Egypt?

Paul Andersen,
St. Paul, Minn.

● *Your editor has a strong liking for stories of the past, too, Paul. Now that you mention it and if the rest of our readers like the idea, we'll assign a writer to do the job.*—ED.

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THE TYPEWRITER

(Concluded from page 65)

commanding: "All right, Jan. Take hold of it. . . . That's right. . . . Now hurl it to the floor."

There was a crash of metal on wood. The base split from end to the other, the platen fell free, and keys were scattered in all directions. Not even Remington Rand could put that Number 10 together again.

I was just in time to grab her before she slipped down in a faint. But she wasn't out long. "The machine — I remember lifting it, hearing your voice. I guess I blacked out. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Not any more it's not," I said. "Look!"

She looked to where the machine lay scattered on the floor. "You mean I did it?"

I nodded.

She smiled, the most radiant smile I've ever seen. I took her in my arms and kissed her. I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I turned. Carney Holt stood behind me.

"You know," he said. "I don't think you can do this play justice as an assistant director. How would you like to take over the director's job?"

I grinned. "You got a deal, Mr. Holt. But you'll have to give me a day to get married —to the future Belinda of this drama."

Funny how you don't mind a gag, if it's a pair of lips like I found on mine. . . .

THE END

THE KILLER WITHIN

(Concluded from page 121)

n't necessary. She was weak but all right now. She began to attend to her uncle's injured face.

I returned to the spaceship. I'm only one man. I didn't know what was right. Maybe I should have waited. Maybe the politicians and the scientists should have been allowed their field day with this spaceship. I admit it, I don't know. But somehow, I couldn't wait. As far as I was concerned, they would never learn about it.

Unless they could make some sense out of the aliens' heat weapon. For I took the weapon outside with me and trained it on the spaceship and squeezed the trigger.

Reducing the spaceship, in ten minutes, to slag. **THE END**

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—Continued from Back Cover

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